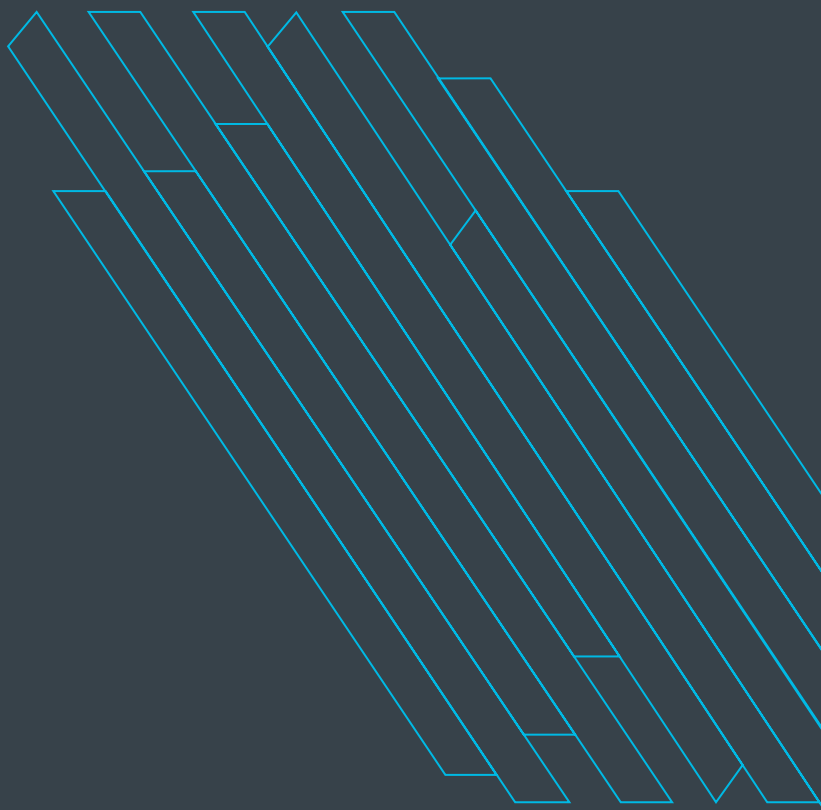
Contemporary
History of Whitehall

INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Women and Whitehall

Gender and the Civil Service since 1979



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Foreword

Many of the challenges facing today's Whitehall have a long history and have appeared, often several times, in the past. But these earlier episodes are not always remembered by current officials: institutional memories can be worryingly short. That is why our Contemporary History of Whitehall project, working with King's College London and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), is such a valuable part of the Institute's work. The project's twin aims, to produce high-quality historical research on under-studied aspects of Whitehall's past and to make them valuable to today's Whitehall, shows the value of academic research interacting with today's public policy.

This fascinating paper on the history of gender diversity in Whitehall, by Catherine Haddon and Joe Devanny, is an important addition to the project's publications. Many studies have examined aspects of Whitehall's development in the last 40 years, but the story is often told from the perspective of the few at the top. As the chapter on statistics shows, this often leads to a male-dominated story. The paper seeks to redress that history, analysing initiatives to improve diversity in the civil service – with many lessons for today's efforts – but also seeking to show how it felt to be a woman in Whitehall throughout that period. The paper's many tales of the challenges some women faced is balanced by insights from interviewees on why they did feel able to flourish. The paper explores the kinds of culture that existed across Whitehall's different departments and offers an interesting commentary on what kinds of attributes it has taken to succeed, not just in terms of gender but also in developing and using different skills and experiences.

The paper is both a personal and an institutional history, but one that is very pertinent today. As Whitehall continues to work on extending diversity, this paper is a reminder that, as well as high-profile initiatives, it is also about culture and the skills and attributes which Whitehall rewards.

Peter Riddell

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September 2015

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Dr Catherine Haddon

Dr Catherine Haddon is a professional historian and constitutional expert who joined the Institute in November 2008 from academia. As well as working as an academic, she has been involved in research for a number of high-profile publications, museum and corporate projects. During her time at the Institute, Catherine has published reports on reforming the Civil Service and making policy in opposition, as well as co-authoring the Institute's publications *Making Minority Government Work, Transitions: Preparing for Changes of Government and Transitions: Lessons Learned*. She regularly features as a historian and commentator on constitutional issues and in the media. In addition to her continuing work on Institute projects relating to Whitehall, the political process and the constitution, she leads the AHRC sponsored project on the History of Whitehall, 1979-2010.

Acknowledgements

This report draws on research into the history of women officials' experience of Whitehall, undertaken as part of the AHRC-funded Contemporary History of Whitehall project hosted by the Institute for Government and King's College London. We are very grateful to the AHRC for supporting this work and to King's for the collaboration. We would like to thank the many current and former officials who agreed to be interviewed as part of this research project and talk about their careers and experience in depth. Some were willing to go on the record, others chose to remain anonymous. We have endeavoured to make this report as representative as possible, but gaps will doubtless remain. We hope nevertheless that this report contributes to the wider understanding of an important and neglected part of contemporary British political history. We have benefited from the advice and support of our colleagues at the Institute for Government, notably Sir Ian Magee, Jill Rutter and Peter Thomas. We are also grateful to Andrew Murphy and Nicole Valentinuzzi for managing the publication process. We also benefitted from the comments on drafts of the report from Sir Ian Magee and Jill Rutter, as well as Professor Ken Young from King's College London and Professor David Richards from the University of Manchester. Any errors or omissions are, of course, our responsibility alone.

Executive summary

Studies of Whitehall's history tend to focus on policy or else changes in the size, shape and organisational structure of the Civil Service. This report is different. It explores the changing experiences of the people who have worked in Whitehall. Our focus is the experience of Whitehall's women and how the gender balance of the Civil Service has changed since 1979.

We interviewed 29 current and former officials, ranging from those who joined Whitehall in the early 1960s to those who joined in the 2000s. Their reflections and memories illuminate this report, conveying a sense of the lived reality of change in Whitehall across the period.

Today's Civil Service is more female (53.3%) than male, but this headline statistic does not reflect life in its more senior grades. For example, women comprise only 38% of the Senior Civil Service (SCS). And Whitehall's elite is even less gender balanced, with women comprising only 19% of permanent secretaries. The SCS's gender balance compares favourably with private sector boards and the party-political class (MPs, peers and MEPs), but at the very top – the cohort of permanent secretaries – Whitehall compares less favourably.

These figures are, of course, only a snapshot; a long history of change precedes them. The first women permanent secretaries were appointed in the 1950s, and Whitehall gradually recognised that its traditional working patterns and career pathways were obstacles to a more gender balanced Civil Service. But few women were subsequently appointed to the top posts until the 1990s. For example, the late Dame Anne Mueller was the only woman permanent secretary in the 1980s.

Change accelerated in the late 1990s and particularly in the 2000s. Since 2001 the Civil Service has been more female than male, and an increased SCS gender balance has crucially been mirrored by similar change in the pipeline of feeder grades.

Our interviewees experienced Whitehall differently as their careers progressed, but also according to the different Departments in which they served. Today, all Whitehall Departments are improving the gender balance of their SCS cohorts, but some Departments – for example, the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) – have historically been backmarkers. For these historically poor performers, their recent progress still leaves them significantly far behind other Departments.

This report also explores the deeper cultural issues that help to shape careers in Whitehall, the importance of personal networks to career progression and the impact of social or educational background on how well officials fit in and get on.

All our interviewees had enjoyed – or are currently enjoying – highly successful careers. But several senior posts continue to elude Whitehall's women – Head of the Civil Service, Permanent Secretary at HM Treasury and FCO – and the seemingly less open process for these appointments appears to disproportionately disadvantage women. One striking example is that of the 12 Principal Private Secretaries to the Prime Minister since 1983, all have been men and only one has not come from the Treasury.

Introduction

Many accounts of the Civil Service since 1979 have focused on the significant changes that have occurred in its size, shape and organisational structure. Less attention has been paid to the people who worked in Whitehall throughout this period, what it felt like to be a civil servant and how this changed over time.

Whitehall officials experienced many changes over the past 30 years: to their recruitment processes, pay and conditions, talent and performance management and to the balance of professional skills they were expected to learn and develop. This report aims to illuminate discussion of one facet of this history, focusing on the question of gender, especially on the experiences of senior women officials.

We approached this topic with two aims in mind. One was to ensure that in the literature on Whitehall history there was a focus on the people that make it up: the human dimension. Historical accounts of Whitehall are not just about structural reforms and major events, but also about how it felt to those working within it. The other aim stems from the danger of history focusing on the perspective of the (predominantly male) permanent secretaries and ministers who made up most of Whitehall during the period we looked at. We wanted to capture the experience of the many women who worked in Whitehall in the past 30 or 40 years. In doing so, we also wanted to examine the way in which that experience has changed over time and, finally, to put the current debate about women in the Civil Service in historical perspective.

Today's Civil Service is more female than male, but Whitehall's most senior figures are much more likely to be men than women. In 1979, women comprised 45.6% of all officials, compared with 53.3% in 2015.[1] Since its creation in 1996, the percentage of women in the Senior Civil Service (SCS) has gone from 17% to 37.9% today.[2] However, at the most senior grade (permanent secretary) the situation, though much improved, is still much less balanced. Though there had been three female permanent secretaries previously, in 1979 there were none. Today the figure stands at less than 20% (seven out of 37) of all Whitehall-based officials who hold the rank of permanent secretary.[3]

The Civil Service has initiated a debate about its stratified gender balance and the broader diversity of the SCS. The September 2014 *Talent Action Plan* implicitly criticised previous efforts to address civil service diversity, which *'had limited success as they did not deal with the actual issues'.*[4] It asked 'why, with the number of women civil servants growing – from 48% in 1998 to 53% today – do they hold only 38% of positions at the top grades; and why are relatively few of the many

[1] A wider trend underlies this, 'where women comprise the majority (65%) of public sector workers and men the majority (59%) of private sector workers'. See Fawcett Society, 'The Changing Labour Market: Delivering for women, delivering for growth', 2013, p. 8, accessed 17 June 2015, http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Fawcett-The-changing-labour-market.pdf

[2] 'Equality and Diversity', Gov.uk, accessed 16 June 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service/about/equality-and-diversity#civil-service-workforce

[3] 'Our Governance', Gov.uk, accessed 16 June 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service/about/our-governance

[4] Cabinet Office, *Talent Action Plan: Removing the barriers to success,* 5 September 2014, p. 4, accessed 19 March 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/351194/Talent_Action_Plan.pdf

talented Fast Streamers from minority ethnic backgrounds promoted to the higher grades? '[5] More recently, the National Audit Office (2015) reported that, despite cultural change and increasing inclusivity, the Civil Service still needed to address the fact that a 'series of previous [diversity] strategies have not led to sustainable change to the approach in the Civil Service, and momentum was lost'.[6]

We have explored the experiences of former and current officials in a programme of 29 research interviews and by looking at the academic and primary literature on various initiatives and reforms addressing civil service diversity.[7] We asked our interviewees to reflect on the ways in which Whitehall and its culture have changed over the past 30 years and on the ways in which Whitehall may still need to change, enabling us to compare and contrast the different experiences and perspectives of cohorts who joined from the early 1960s to the early 2000s.[8]

In the course of the interviews several themes emerged. First, most positively, many interviewees felt that the Civil Service has long been a progressive employer, offering women better terms and conditions, more flexibility and greater opportunities for career progression than other employers, for example in the private sector.[9] The officials we spoke to were virtually unanimous in their view that the Civil Service was a leader throughout that time in its offer to women. This was a consistent view, held by women who had either directly experienced sexism or else could describe the existence of a generally sexist culture in several Whitehall departments from the 1960s into the 1980s. Their argument was not that sexism had not existed in Whitehall, but that it had been perceived as being at least no worse than what would have been experienced in other employment sectors. For women joining in the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Service appeared to offer more opportunities than were offered at the time by the legal profession, financial institutions in the City, or the wider private sector.

However, despite this broadly positive sentiment, a second theme emerged concerning the pace of change and how progress was much more difficult at the top of the organisation. Many of our interviews still seemed to feel that greater gender diversity was slow in coming and that the various initiatives and reforms designed to increase it had proved frustrating. Some interviewees reflected on the disconnection between their hopes as young officials and the subsequent course of change. Dame Ursula Brennan, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice at the time of her interview, told us that:

> We still have not achieved the level of diversity that you would expect if you look at the diversity of the talent that is available. So I am afraid that we have not fulfilled the promise of gender parity at the most senior levels of the Civil Service that those of us who joined the Fast Stream in the mid-1970s thought would be a reality for the new generation of officials.[10]

A final theme, or caveat, is that experiences varied and continue to do so. 'Whitehall' is not shorthand for the Civil Service as a whole. Though we look at the statistics and some of the initiatives focused on the whole of the Civil Service, our main focus has been on senior civil servants working in government departments. A number of our interviewees also talked about the different perspective they had when thinking about broader civil service diversity or working in delivery agencies. Even

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[5] Cabinet Office, 'Civil Service to become among the most female-friendly employers in the country', 5 September 2014, accessed 18 March 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/civil-service-to-become-among-the-most-female-friendly-employers-in-the-country

[6] National Audit Office, *Cabinet Office and Cross-government: Equality, diversity and inclusion in the Civil Service,* 25 June 2015, p. 7, retrieved 25 June 2015, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Equality-diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-civil-service.pdf

[7] Our interviewees were all either former or current senior officials, predominantly (25 out of 29) women. They joined the Civil Service between 1961 and the early 2000s. We adopted a semi-structured approach, asking interviewees to talk about their early career experiences, what had attracted them to the Civil Service, and how they had experienced different aspects of life in Whitehall – promotion, work/life balance, the differences between different departments – over the course of their careers.

While not all our interviewees started their careers in the Fast Stream, they have all subsequently enjoyed highly successful careers in the Civil Service. This is a limiting factor of our research, as we cannot readily compare the experiences of our cohort of very successful women officials with those of women whose career trajectories were different, teasing out how these differences may have affected their experiences of being a woman in Whitehall.

[8] We also convened a public event on 2 June 2015, *Women and Whitehall: How did Whitehall change after 1979 – and what does that mean for its future?* See Devanny, J., 'Women and Whitehall: how did Whitehall change after 1979 – and what does that mean for its future?', Institute for Government, 5 June 2015, accessed 13 June 2015, http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/11833/women-and-whitehall-how-did-whitehall-change-after-1979-and-what-does-that-mean-for-its-future/

[9] This is true of the Civil Service but also of the wider public sector, which offers women 'generally higher levels of pay … across all levels of earnings' than the private sector. See Fawcett Society, 'The Changing Labour Market', op. cit., p. 9.

[10] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

within Whitehall, women did not have a uniform experience, as different departments have had – and continue to have – their own respective cultures, functions and HR needs. Departmental variation was a persistent theme throughout the period, both quantitatively (in the number of especially senior women officials) and qualitatively (in the experiences of those officials), with the respective culture of each department playing a part in shaping the experience of its officials. Our interviewees also stressed that change is neither inevitable nor immutable, and that without sustained focus and effort the drive to improve Whitehall's diversity could stall or even go into reverse.

This report begins by briefly recounting women's experiences in Whitehall before 1979, including the elimination of the 'marriage bar' and the appointments of the first women permanent secretaries in the 1950s. The second chapter offers a data-driven presentation of Whitehall's changing gender balance since 1979, looking at the relatively slow rate of change in the number of senior women in Whitehall during the 1980s and 1990s, and at the acceleration (and limits) of that change from the late 1990s onwards.

Chapter 3 takes a thematic approach to exploring the career experiences of our interviewees, starting with their recruitment and early career and moving on to consider their experience of promotion and career progression, sexism and the barriers faced by women within Whitehall in general and in particular departments. The next chapter describes the major initiatives in Whitehall during this period to drive change and to increase the number of women in the SCS. It also explores the roles that ministers and senior officials have played in nurturing female talent or changing the working practices within departments, and the experiences some of our interviewees have had as role models for more junior officials. Chapter 5 briefly puts these developments into broader social context, comparing the changes in civil service gender balance with similar changes in other political, public and private sector professions.

Finally, Chapter 6 explores the broader and less tangible, but nonetheless important, issue of the various strands of Whitehall's 'culture' and whether there have been in the past (perhaps unconscious) barriers to the career progression of women in particular, but also of others who did not seem to have the 'right' background to gain admission to Whitehall's most senior ranks. We identify some of the cultural barriers to progression that have been perceived to have affected not only the careers of women officials, but also the careers of those (men and women) whose educational or socio-economic background placed them outside the dominant 'in group' and thereby reduced their chances of joining Whitehall's elite. We explore the extent to which this cultural dimension is a question of the different skills, personality types or ways of working that have been privileged in Whitehall over the past 30 years.

According to Alice Perkins, a former Director General in the Cabinet Office, the Civil Service 'is not terribly good at remembering its history' and so successful initiatives and 'things that worked' in its recent past can be forgotten, making future change harder to achieve.[11] This report contributes to the exercise of remembering that history by collecting the reflections and views of some of those (both former and current) senior officials who lived through and actively shaped these changes, as well as examining the reform initiatives and other factors that drove change.

[11] Devanny, J., op. cit.

Women and Whitehall before 1979

Until the 1950s Whitehall's highest ranks were entirely male. Change was slow, but the careers of some pioneering women officials stand out. This chapter briefly charts key developments from the early twentieth century to 1979.

The first half of the 20th century saw the gradual removal of the most explicit barriers to women's entry into, retention and advancement within the Civil Service. The First World War had a significant impact on the number of women employed in the Civil Service, which rose from nearly 54,000 (21% of the total) in 1914 to more than 230,000 (56% of the total) in 1919. But peacetime restrictions were re-imposed and the proportion of women officials fell to 27% by 1938.[12] Women were also not considered for entry into the highest, Administrative Class on similar criteria to men until 1925. And the marriage bar – which required women to resign from the Civil Service on marriage – obviously limited their career prospects. The marriage bar was waived during the Second World War – when an influx of temporary civil servants, including many women, significantly increased the size of the Civil Service[13] – and removed in most departments in 1946.[14]

Dame Evelyn (later Baroness) Sharp became the first woman permanent secretary (at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government) in 1955[15] and was joined in 1959 by Dame Mary Smieton (at the Department of Education).[16] Both were significant forerunners but also outliers. Sharp and Smieton retired in the mid-1960s; subsequently the most senior woman official was Dame Mildred Riddelsdell, who was appointed Second Permanent Secretary in the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) in 1971. On Riddelsdell's retirement in 1973, the next woman to be appointed as a permanent secretary was Dame Anne Mueller, who became Second Permanent Secretary at the Management and Personnel Office in 1984.[17]

Just as the number of women appointed to senior positions remained limited, so Whitehall's working conditions were slow to change. For example, the government did not commit to pay equality in the non-industrial Civil Service until 1955, with a phased proposal to equalise pay for women civil servants (but only in grades where there was common recruitment of men and women) by 1961.[18] Women in the industrial Civil Service waited until the 1970s (following the Equal Pay Act of 1970)[19]

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[12] Cracknell, R., and Baker, C., *Women in Public Life, the Professions and the Boardroom*, House of Commons Library (SN05170), 5 March 2014, retrieved 24 June 2015, http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN05170

[13] Between 1939 and 1945 the Civil Service increased significantly in size, from 163,000 to 499,000 non-industrial staff and from 184,000 to 615,000 industrial staff. See 'Civil Service Statistics 1988', HMSO, p. 37, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/css88_tcm6-4328.pdf

[14] Cunningham, R., Lord, A., and Delaney, L., '"Next Steps" for Equality?: The Impact of Organizational Change on Opportunities for Women in the Civil Service', *Gender, Work & Organization*, vol. 6, no. 2, April 1999, p. 68.

[15] Theakston, K. 'Sharp, Evelyn Adelaide, Baroness Sharp (1903–1985)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2011 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31672, accessed 31 July 2015]

[16] Obituary: Dame Mary Smieton, *The Telegraph*, 31 January 2005, retrieved 29 March 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1482390/Dame-Mary-Smieton.html

[17] Lowe, R., *The Official History of the British Civil Service: Reforming the Civil Service, Volume 1: The Fulton Years, 1966-81*, Routledge, London, 2011.

[18] House of Commons debate, 25 January 1955, vol. 536, cols 31-32, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1955/jan/25/civil-service-equal-pay

[19] Equal Pay Act 1970, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1970/41/enacted

for pay equality, in line with the rest of industry but obviously later than non-industrial civil servants. The Employment Protection Act (1975)[20] made it illegal to dismiss a woman because she was pregnant and introduced statutory maternity provision, while the Sex Discrimination Act (1975)[21] prohibited discrimination on the grounds of gender or marital status.

Most of the *explicit* barriers to women's entry into or progression within Whitehall had been removed by the 1950s, but the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was an extreme outlier, with a marriage bar as late as 1972.[22] Helen McCarthy's recent study of women and the Diplomatic Service claims that the FCO of the 1960s and 1970s *'could no longer be described as a creaking bastion of traditionalism, nor could it be said to be exactly leading the charge for sex equality'.*[23]

A small number of posts across the Civil Service continued to be gender-restricted – both 'men only' and 'women only' posts existed – into the 1970s.[24] But from the 1970s onwards, there was a distinct shift across Whitehall, from removing barriers to entry *into* the Civil Service towards paring back the administrative and cultural barriers to (gender) equality *within* the Civil Service. The percentage of women permanently employed rose significantly between 1950 and 1970. The most significant increase was, however, in the lower clerical grades (from 35% to 50% women). In that same period, the increase in women's representation was much smaller in the more senior grades, such as the executive grade (20% to 21%) and the even more senior administrative class (7% to 9%).[25] Put simply, more women were joining the Civil Service at lower grades, but women were not being promoted at the same rate as men and were not reaching the highest posts within Whitehall.

Aside from the disparities in the promotion prospects of female and male officials, gender discrimination inside government was not restricted to women civil servants: it was also suffered by the small number of women ministers. Barbara (later Baroness) Castle's appointment as Minister for Overseas Development in 1964 had made her only the fourth woman Cabinet minister in British history.[26] Two years later, Shirley (now Baroness) Williams was appointed as a junior minister in the Ministry of Labour. According to Williams, her appointment had been unsuccessfully opposed by the ministry's permanent secretary, Sir James Dunnett, on account of her gender. Moreover, following Williams's appointment, Dunnett refused to communicate with her directly on any matter.[27] His behaviour was not aimed solely at women ministers. Kate Jenkins, who joined the Civil Service as a Fast Stream Assistant Principal in 1968 and went on to co-author the highly influential *Next Steps* report (1988), told us that, in her first department, Dunnett had explicitly refused to promote any woman beyond the rank of principal.[28]

Dunnett's alleged behaviour towards both women ministers and women officials is an example of unchecked discriminatory attitudes at the most senior levels of the Civil Service in the 1960s and 1970s. Whitehall was sometimes not only sexist but also clueless: Kate Jenkins recalled *'the importance of having women around'* in the 1970s, when she had to convince a parliamentary counsel (and father of four) that pregnancy lasted 40 and not 36 weeks, while working on legislation for maternity leave.[29]

By 1979, the Civil Service had made significant progress in increasing the number of women it employed. It had removed several explicitly discriminatory practices, such as the marriage bar. Sexism persisted, including at the most senior levels, but the Civil Service was nonetheless seen as more progressive than many comparable employers. As the Civil Service Department's Kemp-Jones report on *The Employment of Women in the Civil Service*[30] recognised in 1971, Whitehall needed

[20] Employment Protection Act 1975, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/71/contents/enacted

[21] Sex Discrimination Act 1975, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/65/enacted

[22] McCarthy, H., *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, pp. 283-90.

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 285.

[24] Kemp-Jones, E. M., et al., *The Employment of Women in the Civil Service*, HMSO, London, 1971, pp. 9-10.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[26] Margaret Bondfield was the first woman Cabinet minister and privy councillor, serving as Minister of Labour between 1929 and 1931; Ellen Wilkinson was the second, serving as Education Minister from 1945 until her death in 1947; and Florence Horsbrugh was the first woman in a Conservative Cabinet, serving as Minister for Education between 1951 and 1954.

[27] Williams, S., *Climbing the Bookshelves*, Virago, London, 2009, p. 167.

[28] Institute for Government interview, February 2015. Efficiency Unit, *Improving Management in Government: The Next Steps, Report to the Prime Minister*, HMSO, London, 1988.

[29] Devanny, J., op. cit.

[30] Kemp-Jones et al., op. cit., p. 7.

to improve the retention of women officials and the promotion of women to senior posts, and such improvements were likely to require a reimagining of the working patterns and career pathways then on offer.

Charting gender balance in Whitehall

A look at the statistics can help us to understand how Whitehall has become more gender balanced since 1979, both overall and grade-by-grade, including in its most senior grades.

The annual Civil Service Statistics tell a story of an increasingly gender-balanced workforce, with gradual improvement in the representation of women at the highest grades (from 17% of the SCS in 1996 to 37.8% in 2014).

Figure 1

Gender of Civil Service, 1979 to 2014 (percentage, headcount)

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

While the balance of gender in the Civil Service as a whole has changed considerably between 1979 and 2015, from the statistics we can also see how much of this change came in the second half of that period. Changes to grade structure from 1996 mean that it is best to look at the period before and after 1996 separately. Doing so also shows a contrast between the two periods.

Little change at the top: 1979-95

In the 1980s and early 1990s the most senior grades of the Civil Service were overwhelmingly male. One academic study described the 1980s and 1990s as a period of 'modest achievement' in improving equality and diversity in the Civil Service, pointing out that while there were increasing numbers of women officials, this did not tell the whole story. Not only were the numbers of senior women low, but the Civil Service struggled with its broader diversity. For example, 81% of ethnic minority women in the Civil Service were clustered in its lowest grades.[31] And there were still

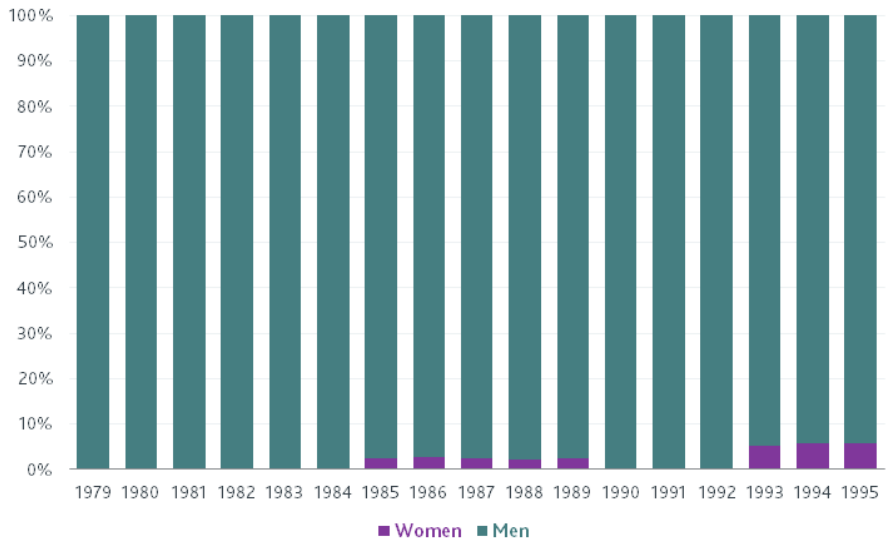
[31] Cunningham, R., Lord, A., and Delaney, L., op. cit., p. 68.

'disproportionately few disabled civil servants in the higher grades' – 3.8% of total civil servants in 1997, compared with only 1.3% in the SCS.[32]

In the 15 years after 1979, Whitehall struggled to mirror its growing number of women officials in the gender balance of its most senior cohort of officials, those at Grade 1. Starting at the top, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the highest grade of the Civil Service was predominantly male.

Figure 2

Gender of Grade 1 civil servants, 1979 to 1995 (percentage, headcount)

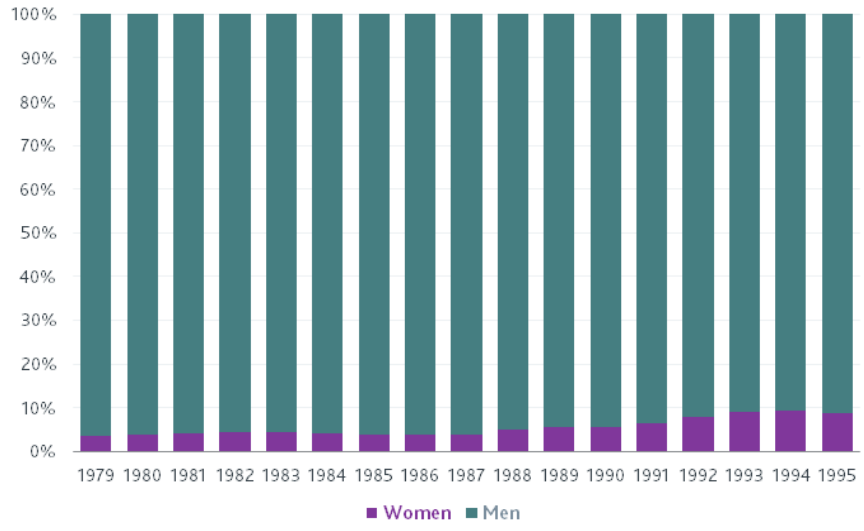


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

More broadly than just Grade 1, the gender balance of officials in the three most senior grades was similarly slow to change across this earlier period. There was a modest headcount reduction in these grades up to 1995 and some slow growth in the number of women officials at this level.

Figure 3

Gender of Grade 1-3 civil servants, 1979 to 1995 (percentage, headcount)



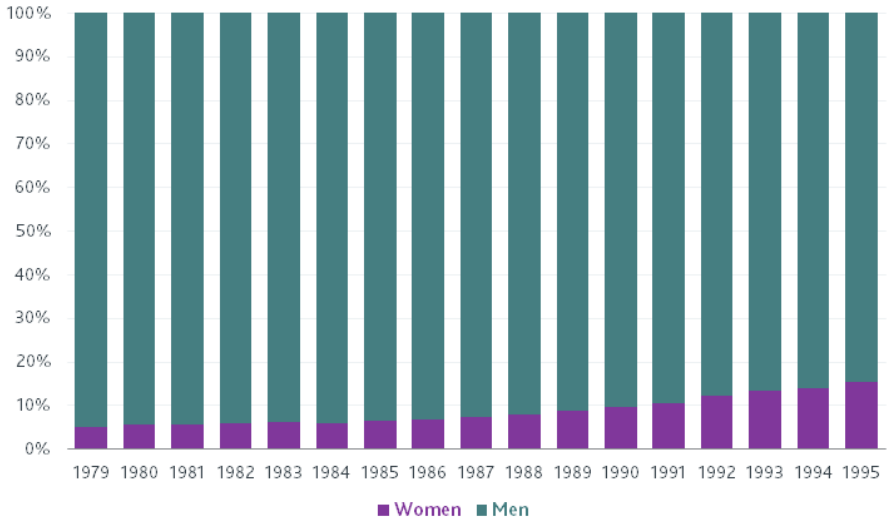
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

[32] Corby, S., 'Equal Opportunities: Fair shares for all?', in Corby, S., and White, G. (eds), *Employee Relations in the Public Services: Themes and issues*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 102.

The pipeline grades for assistant secretary (Grade 5) and principal (Grade 7) saw a slightly faster but still modest rate of change over this period.

Figure 4

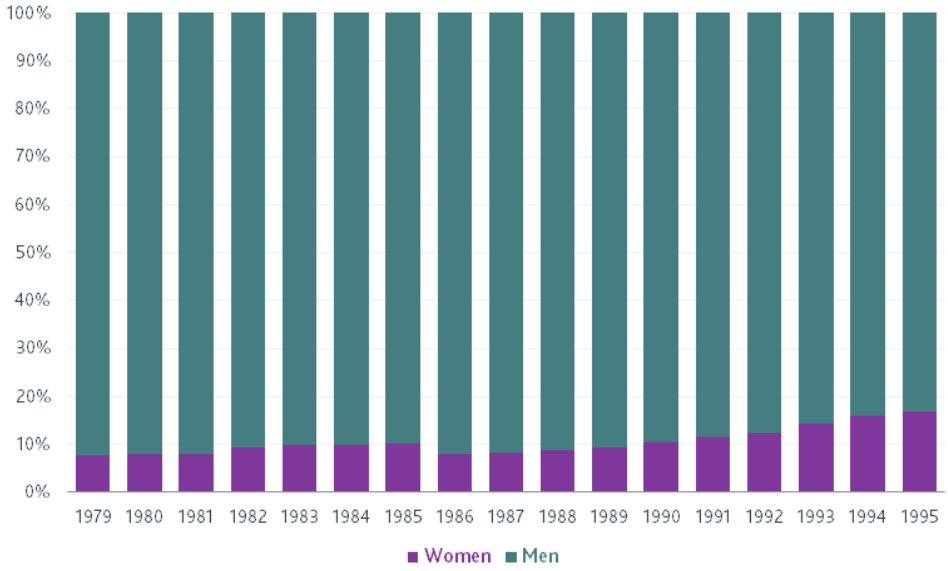
Gender of Grade 5 civil servants, 1979 to 1995 (percentage, headcount)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

Figure 5

Gender of Grade 7 civil servants, 1979 to 1995 (percentage, headcount)

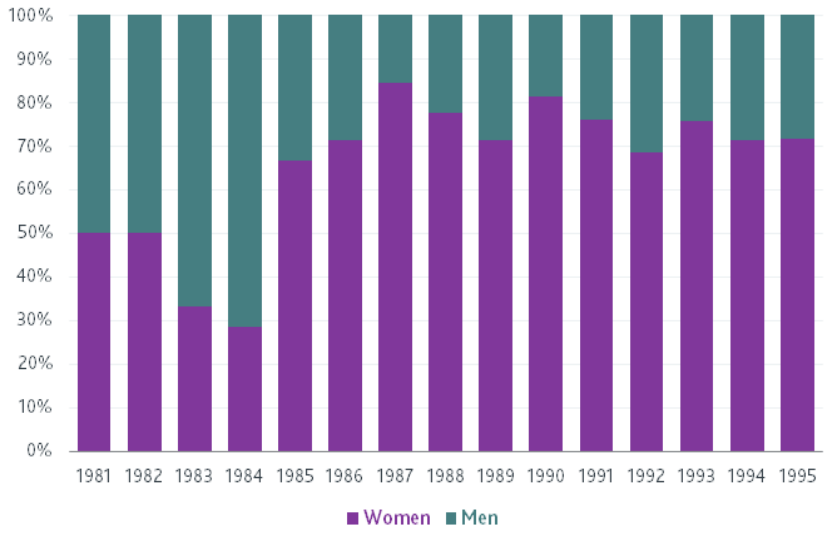


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

There was more rapid change, however, in the numbers of Grade 5 and 7 officials (predominantly women) working part time.

Figure 6

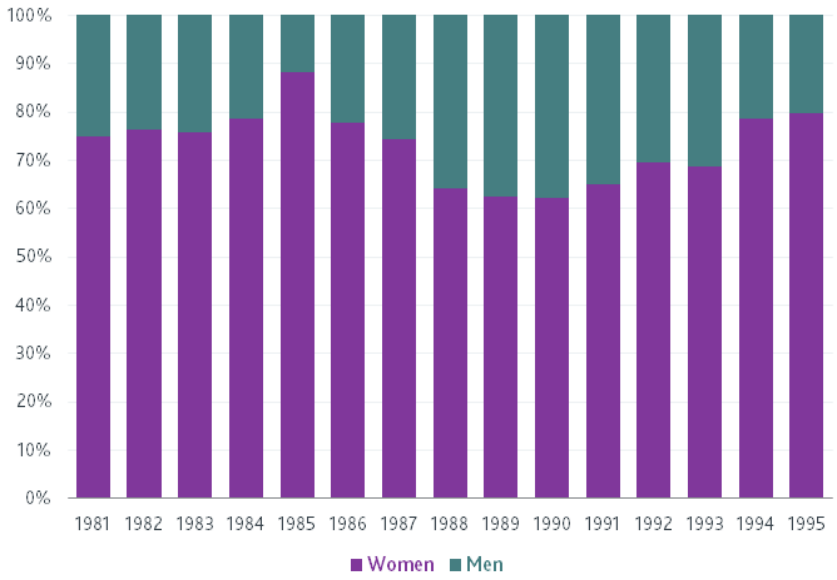
Gender of part-time Grade 5 civil servants, 1981 to 1995 (percentage, headcount)



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

Figure 7

Gender of part-time Grade 7 civil servants, 1981 to 1995 (percentage, headcount)



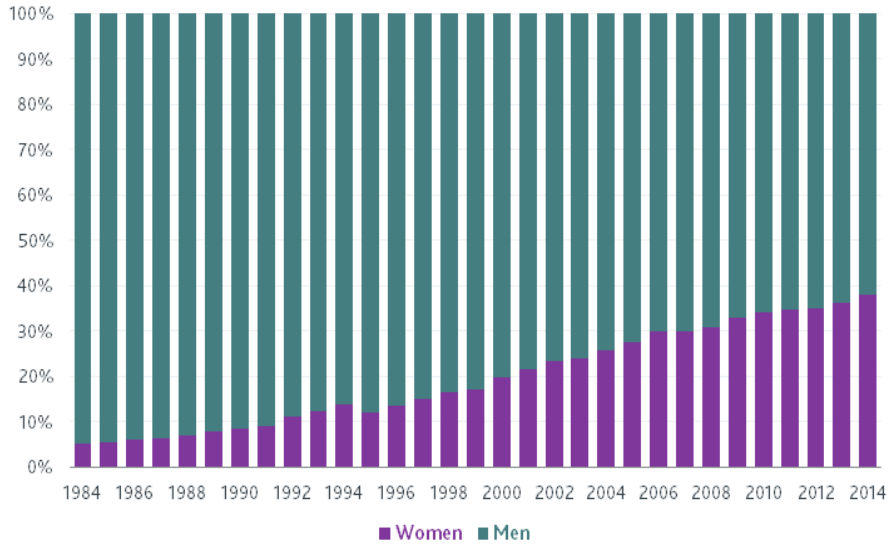
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

Women and Whitehall since 1996

As part of wider reforms of the Civil Service, the government created the Senior Civil Service in 1996 out of the old grades 1 to 5. By charting the changing gender balance of the SCS/grades 1-5 from 1984 (when the Civil Service first started to refer to grades 1-5) onwards, it is possible to see that change accelerated from the mid-1990s.

Figure 8

Gender of Grade 1-5 civil servants, 1984 to 2014 (percentage, headcount)

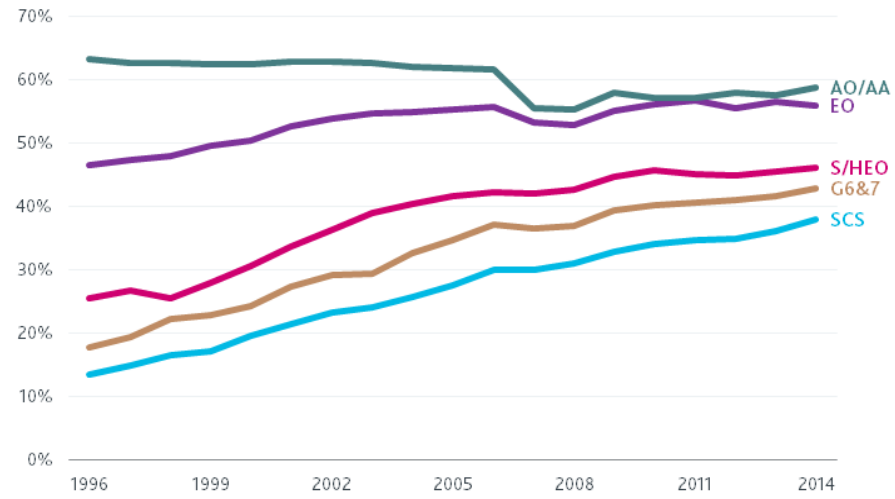


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

This was not just the case for the SCS. There is a similar historical trend of increasing gender balance across most civil service grades throughout this period, the exception being women's representation at the lower grades, administrative officer (AO) and administrative assistant (AA), which tapered off and slightly fell, albeit from a much higher starting point.

Figure 9

Women in Civil Service grades, 1996 to 2014 (percentage, headcount)



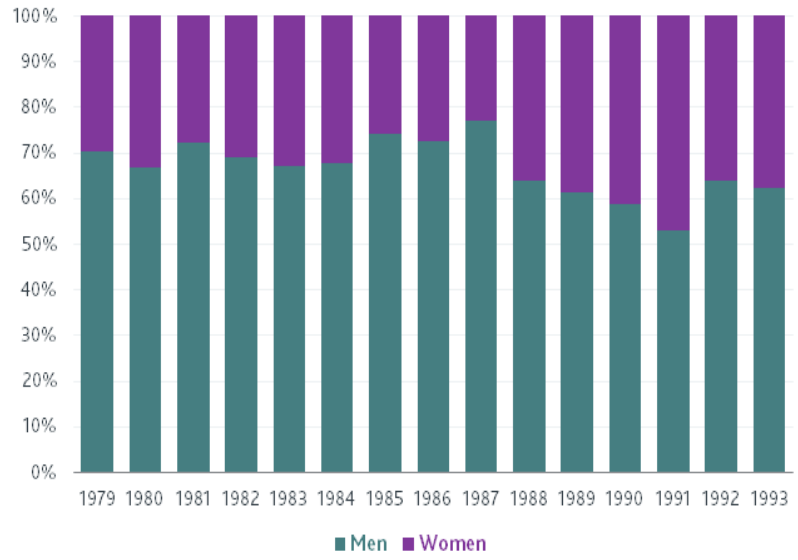
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

Women in the Fast Stream

There was a similar trend in the increasing gender balance of the civil service Fast Stream across the whole period, with more women being recruited over time, but change being relatively slow in the first part of the period. In 1979 women comprised almost 30% of Fast Stream administration trainees,[33] whereas by 1993 they comprised nearly 38%.

Figure 10

Gender of administration trainees, 1979 to 1993 (percentage, headcount)

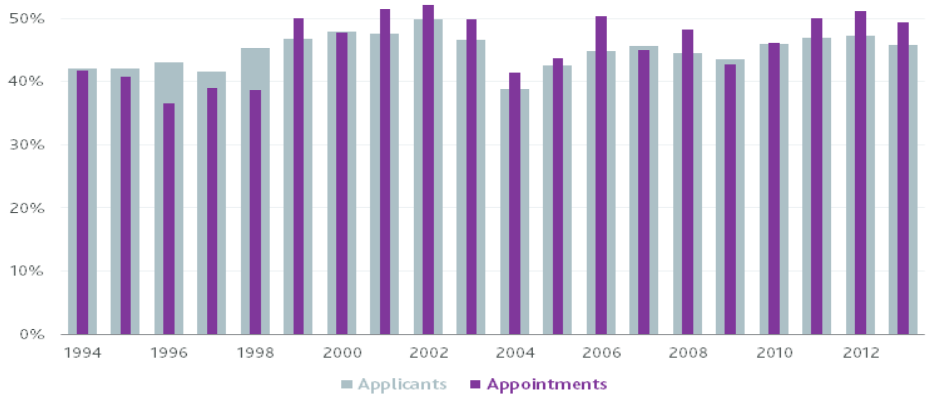


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

Looking now at Fast Stream appointments from 1994 to 2013, it is clear that there was a significant increase in the percentage of women recruited in 1999 (50%) with the percentage never falling to pre-1999 levels thereafter. Fast Stream recruitment in 1999 was also significant in that it was the first year in this period when women comprised a greater percentage of Fast Stream appointments than they did Fast Stream applicants, with this trend continuing from then on, with occasional reversals.

Figure 11

Fast Stream applicants and appointments, 1994 to 2013 - percentage women



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

[33] Administration trainees were Fast Stream officials under the age of 26 and in their first two years of service. After their first two years, administration trainees were reclassified as HEO (D) officials.

This shows that since 1979 there has been a gradual trend of increasing gender balance in the recruitment of civil service Fast Stream entrants. In recent years there has been virtual gender parity in Fast Stream recruitment, with women comprising a higher percentage of appointments than applicants.

Fast Streamers are recruited for their potential to be promoted quickly into more senior positions. Let us now look at the changing gender balance of Whitehall's most senior cohort, the permanent secretaries.

Permanent secretaries

Permanent secretaries (those officials at Grade 1 of the Civil Service) were virtually all men into the 1990s. Anne Mueller was the only female Grade 1 official in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, Prime Minister John Major made three prominent appointments of women to lead, respectively, the Crown Prosecution Service (Dame Barbara Mills), Customs and Excise (Dame Valerie Strachan) and the Security Service, perhaps better known as MI5 (Dame Stella Rimington).[34] Other appointments followed, such as Dame Ann Bowtell as Permanent Secretary at the Department of Social Security and Rachel Lomax as Permanent Secretary at the Welsh Office.

Since the 1990s, most departments have appointed at least one woman permanent secretary, but only one – the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – has appointed more than two in its history.[35] Defra's case is particularly striking as it is one of the youngest departments in Whitehall, having been created in 2001. Five departments have never appointed a woman to the top job, and another – the Department for Education – has not done so since it appointed one of the first women permanent secretaries (Mary Smieton) in 1959.

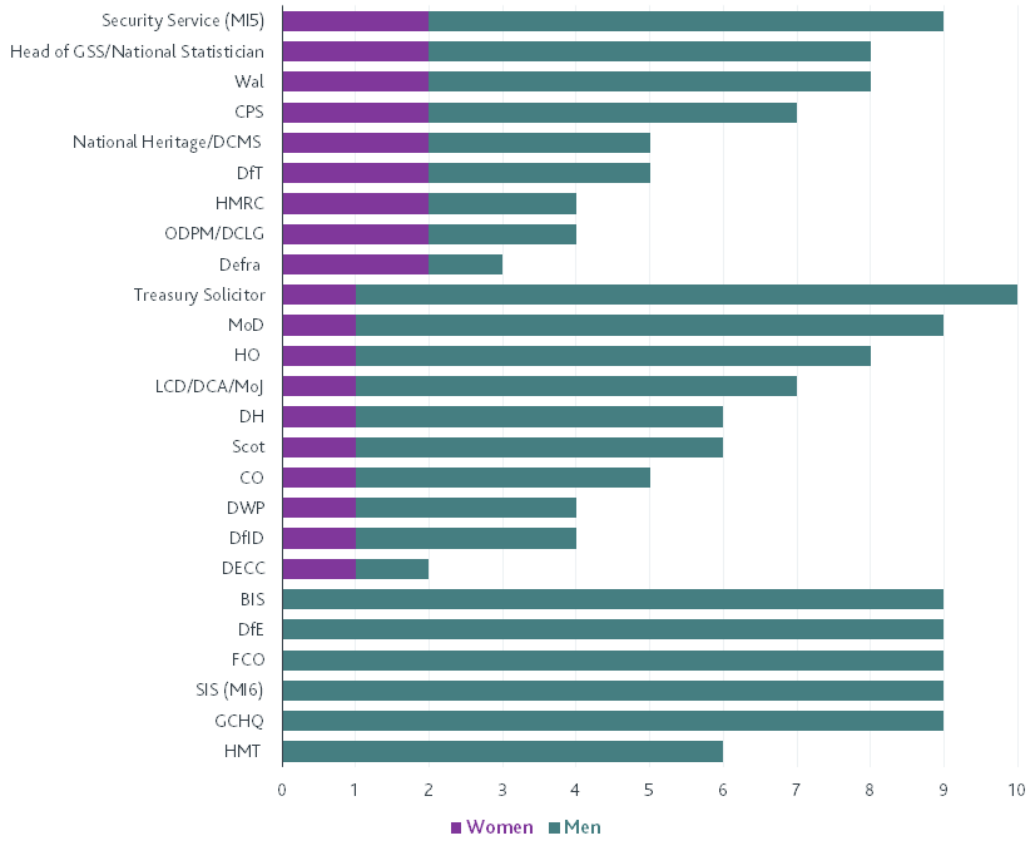
Figure 12 charts the gender balance of permanent secretaries by department since 1979, omitting the 'floating' permanent secretaries, all those who do not formally head a department or agency. These include second permanent secretaries in departments such as HM Treasury and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), as well as senior officials in the Cabinet Office, such as the National Security Adviser or the Prime Minister's Europe Adviser. There are currently nine such officials, only one of whom (the Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies) is a woman. The rank of Permanent Secretary is held by the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office as well as three other members of the Diplomatic Service – the ambassadors to Paris and Washington, and the Permanent Representative to the EU. While the precise number of these floating Permanent Secretary posts has fluctuated since 1979, the male dominance of these positions has not.

[34] Langdon, J., 'The man who loved women: So spies, crime and now drugs are jobs for the girls. But does this trio of Majorettes herald the birth of John's classless society?' *The Guardian*, 8 January 1993.

[35] Following the 2 July 2015 announcement that Clare Moriarty, director general of the Rail Executive, would replace Bronwyn Hill as Permanent Secretary at Defra later in the summer. See 'New Permanent Secretary for Defra', Gov.uk, 2 July 2015, retrieved 13 July 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-permanent-secretary-for-defra

Figure 12

Departmental permanent secretaries by gender, 1979 to July 2015



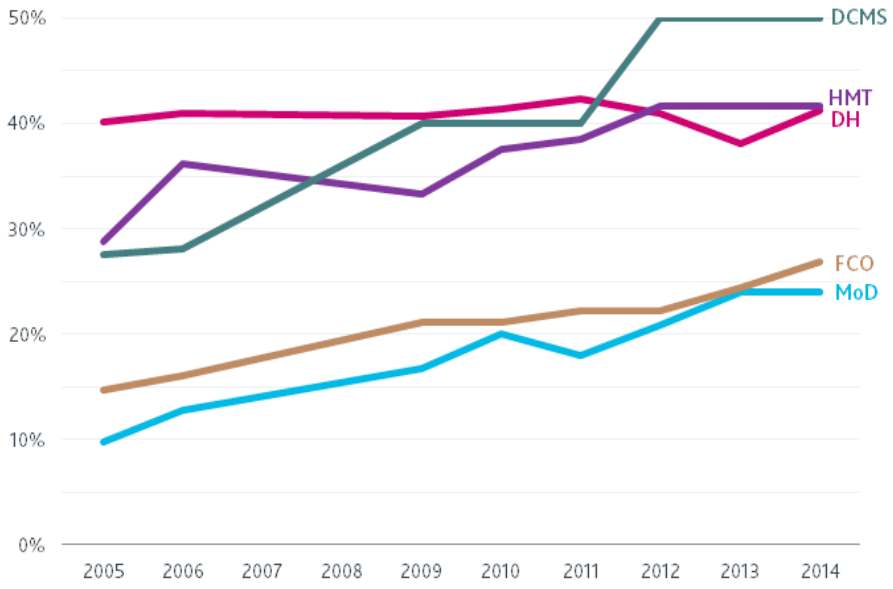
Source: IfG analysis of various sources including Civil Service Year Books, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, *Who's Who*, GOV.UK.

Departmental variation: 2005-14

The Whitehall-wide picture of changing gender balance since 1979 masks an important fact: while all departments are becoming more gender balanced, some are more gender balanced than others. This can be seen by comparing the trajectory of SCS gender balance in five Whitehall departments.

Figure 13

Percentage of women in Senior Civil Service, 2005 to 2014 - selected departments



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

The aggregate SCS-wide figures hide the fact that, for example, the FCO and Ministry of Defence (MoD) have long been Whitehall's backmarkers in terms of gender balance at higher grades, or that the Department of Health has historically been ahead of many other departments, albeit losing this status somewhat over the past five years.

Collectively these charts show us at a macro level the extent of Whitehall's changing gender balance over the past 35 years. They suggest that there was little change in the 1980s and 1990s, but that the pace of change accelerated in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s, albeit from different starting points in different departments. The Civil Service is now mostly female, but this demographic change has not extended (to the same extent) to the SCS or the elite cadre of permanent secretaries. These are the trends that we explored with our interviewees, eliciting their reflections about what it felt like to be a woman in Whitehall across this period and why, despite the increasing numbers of women at lower levels and in the SCS, this change was not reflected proportionately in the most senior positions.

Career experiences

In our interviews, we explored the different stages of people's careers, and how experiences changed over time. We wanted to understand what motivated career Whitehall officials, their first impressions of the Civil Service and how they subsequently developed in the job. This provides wider context for the exploration of more specifically gender-related issues.

Recruitment and early experiences

We began by asking our interviewees what motivated them to apply to the Civil Service in the first place. Many of the current and former officials we interviewed, all of whom have pursued highly successful careers, said that they had favourable preconceptions about the Civil Service before joining it. In particular, interviewees who joined in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s had seen the Civil Service as a progressive employer in which women could carve out successful careers at a time when, for example, the law or business offered fewer opportunities.

In earlier decades, women could be conscious of their separateness, while still feeling that they were able to succeed. Valerie Strachan, a former chair of HM Customs and Excise, who joined the department as a Fast Stream Assistant Principal in 1961, was representative of those recruited in the 1960s and later. She told us that when she was first posted into a 'very male dominated' department, in which she was conscious of being a minority, she nonetheless felt welcomed and supported: 'The sense that I had was that people thought, this is an unusual animal and she looks as though she wants to work hard, and we should enable her to show what she can do.'[36]

Whitehall departments appeared to compare favourably with some other public sector bodies. Jill Rutter, who went on to be Treasury Communications Director and Defra Director of Strategy and Sustainable Development, joined the Treasury as an Administration Trainee in 1978 as part of a Fast Stream cohort of five (two women, three men – four of whom had studied Oxford's Politics, Philosophy and Economics degree). She contrasted the Treasury of 1978 favourably with the Bank of England, which had been another possible employer:

I had not really liked the Bank of England, because when I went to see them I asked them my standard question about any organisation I went to be interviewed with … which was whether they had any women in senior positions, and their response was, well, it was only a couple of years ago that we stopped women having to be chaperoned in the building.[37]

We moved on to discussing our interviewees' experience of their first few jobs and what support they felt they were given. Again, we saw quite a bit of continuity across the period. Several interviewees told us that their initial postings had been relatively uninspiring and even boring. When we asked why they had remained in the Civil Service, most identified a particular job or boss who had inspired them to stay, with renewed enthusiasm for their work. One representative experience was related by Alice Perkins, who described her first posting as a Fast Streamer in the DHSS in 1971:

To be completely blunt about it, the job was pretty tedious. It was located way away from where all my peers were. I felt pretty isolated … it was a real shock to my system, after the freedom of university, having to knuckle down to a routine, not being very excited about what I was working on, and I struggled for the first six months.[38]

[36] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[37] Institute for Government interview, April 2015.

What changed for Perkins was a new and exciting opportunity, which came her way at the behest of a senior official who had looked out for her:

> I was incredibly lucky because the person who was my Under Secretary was a delightful woman, quite unusual in those days. She obviously kept an eye out for me and she must have picked up that I was pretty disenchanted. I was thinking of not staying the course … and this woman took a punt and gave me an interesting and demanding new job. Life just changed completely from that point because anybody could see that this role was really important, dealing with issues that really mattered … And from then on, I saw the point and so that got me to stay.[39]

Like Alice Perkins, many of our interviewees joined as graduate entrants to the Fast Stream, as Assistant Principals or Administration Trainees (ATs).[40] Competitive entry to the civil service elite (Administration Class) had existed throughout the 20th century, albeit only from 1925 for women. The process was reformed several times in the post-war period, including to improve opportunities for serving officials to enter the scheme. Before 1969, there were two routes of entry, Method I and Method II. Method I involved academic examinations, interviews and further written papers, whereas Method II's competitive selection process, introduced in 1948, involved three stages: a preliminary qualifying test, a selection board and a final interview,[41] and was essentially the precursor to today's Fast Stream process in recruiting talented graduates. In 1969, Method I was abolished,[42] and Method II became the only route, despite criticism of it in the Fulton Report (1968) for favouring Oxbridge graduates. [43]

We also asked interviewees about the kind of training they received and how this helped. Many said that the biggest contribution was in how they developed networks. Fast Stream entrants benefited from the network provided both by their cohort of fellow new entrants, the wider Fast Stream, and by the senior officials they met as part of their training courses or – especially in the case of those sent to private offices – in the course of their early career postings.

Ellen Roberts, a new entrant to the DHSS in 1980, noted the importance of her Fast Stream cohort as a source of support. They would often meet for lunch in the department's canteen, 'so it was very much a close cohort, really ⋯ There was a sense of support actually and we did used to meet and exchange information about how our jobs were going and that's how you're able to calibrate in a sense … you'd exchange information and learning across the group.' [44]

Although the precise configuration of Fast Stream training has changed over the years, for much of our period the mixture of at-desk training within a local team and larger, more formal training courses outside of the department provided a good blend of practical learning and opportunities for cultivating a broader network of contacts.[45]

Valerie Strachan told us that her initial experience as a new-entrant Fast Streamer in the early 1960s was of lots of at-desk training, punctuated by fixed periods on formal, external courses:

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[38] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[39] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[40] A summary of the evolution of Fast Stream recruitment from 1968 to the 2000s can be found in Burnham, J., and Pyper, R., *Britain's Modernised Civil Service*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2008, pp. 198-9.

[41] Gladden, E. N., *Civil Services of the United Kingdom: 1885-1970*, Psychology Press, London, 1967, pp. 72-3.

[42] House of Lords, 'Public Service – Report', 19 January 1998, para 49, retrieved 24 June 2015, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199798/ldselect/ldpubsrv/055/psrep06.htm#a20

[43] For more information on the changes to graduate entry during this period, see Fry, G., *The Changing Civil Service*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1985, pp. 52-63.

[44] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[45] According to one Civil Service College official in the mid-1980s, Fast Stream training in the 1970s 'was based on two long courses of eight to 15 weeks taken between postings. The courses comprised a mix of the disciplines fashionable at the time – economics, statistics, public administration, social/industrial policy, finance and staff management. However, by 1980 conditions in the Civil Service began to make it difficult for departments to release staff for long courses. This, together with decreased recruitment, made for poor use of College resources. A change was needed.' Thereafter, from September 1981 'a modular system was introduced to meet formal training needs of the different phases of the early career of those in the Administration Trainee and Higher Executive Officer (Development) grades'. See Fry, G. K., *Policy and Management in the British Civil Service*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 93-4.

A bit later I went on the five-month course at Regent's Park[46], which alas was dropped soon after. It was a very expensive way of training people, but we were lectured to by some of the most distinguished figures in the land and, again, made a great network of friends in the process.[47]

In addition to Fast Stream entry, the Civil Service offered the prospect of joining at more junior grades and progressing up to senior levels, especially in the earlier part of our period. Ann Chant, who joined the National Assistance Board straight from school in 1963 and retired as a director general of HMRC in 2005, has commended the Civil Service for providing women and non-graduates with the virtually unparalleled opportunity to pursue highly successful careers.[48] Similarly, the HMRC Director Dorothy Brown, reflecting on her entry into the Civil Service as an administrative officer in 1979, told us that:

Even back then in the late '70s there was a perception, certainly from my mother, that actually as a woman going into the Civil Service they thought that you would have opportunities. Not necessarily to rise to the top, but my mum had this view that the Civil Service represented a fair way of treating women.[49]

Promotion and getting to the top

In the earlier part of our period the process for allocating posts and promotions was opaque and left little room for officials to shape the direction of their careers. Principal establishment officers, in consultation with other senior officials, distributed personnel across their departments and wider Whitehall.

Referring to Treasury career management in the 1970s and 1980s, Jill Rutter said that 'at the time, the management of your career was much more opaque than it is now. Hardly any jobs were advertised, it was all secret postings behind closed doors … Your career was done to you – there was no sense of self-management back then.'[50]

Promotion opportunities became more open over time, especially from the late 1990s, facilitated in part by technological change and internet or intranet advertising. For example, in 2000 an electronic Recruitment Gateway was created to advertise vacancies online, together with an internal vacancies website on the Government Secure Intranet.[51]

Despite a more open process, it was interesting that several of our interviewees emphasised how serendipity, patronage and the existence of informal networks were still an important influence on career pathways and progression in the 2000s and even today. One senior official with more than 20 years' experience across several Whitehall departments, including at the centre of government, reflected on how this manifested itself throughout her career:

I would say that for a number of the most senior jobs, in some of the central organisations – the Foreign Office, Cabinet Office and Number 10 – recruitment is not always as fair and open as the formal recruitment policy suggests … Now you would want to test this – I am not certain – but if you looked at the appointment of some of our most senior ambassador posts such as France, UKRep [UK Representation to the EU] or Washington, they are said to have all been managed moves, organised among the most senior FCO permanent secretaries, who are all male.[52]

Appointments involving a strong degree of recommendation from the previous occupant, such as the principal private secretary (PPS) to the prime minister, seemed to our interviewees to be particularly vulnerable to closed, informal selection. According to one senior official:

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[46] The Centre of Administrative Studies was located at Cambridge Gate, Regent's Park. It was created by HM Treasury in 1963 to provide economics and other training for Assistant Principals.

[47] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[48] Institute for Government event, *Women and Whitehall: How did Whitehall change after 1979?*, op. cit.

[49] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[50] Institute for Government interview, April 2015.

[51] Wilson, R., 'Report to the Prime Minister on Progress 1999-2000', Cabinet Office, London, autumn 2000. Quoted in Thomas, P., and Panchamia, N., *Bringing in and Bringing on Talent*, Institute for Government, 2014, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/case%20study%20bilbo.pdf

[52] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

If the outgoing PPS is a Treasury man, then history suggests that the person they support as their successor is known to them, probably a friend, and in their image. It is not a gender issue, but one of diversity. For a job like that there will be plenty of good, suitably qualified people who work in the Scottish government or DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] or elsewhere who would bring new energy and leadership, [but] are not known at the centre, or thought to be of the right sort. As a consequence you end up with a less diverse workforce in key central roles, not just on a gender basis, but in terms of breadth of experience and skills. Genuinely open recruitment would probably not have resulted in the last four or five PPSs to the PM all having been white men from the Treasury.[53]

Rather more than the last four or five, in fact. From career Treasury official Robin (now Lord) Butler's appointment as PPS to the Prime Minister in 1982, all 11 subsequent PPSs have been male former Treasury officials, with the exception of the diplomat Sir John Holmes, PPS to Tony Blair between 1997 and 1999.[54] Holmes was promoted at a time when Blair's team was being persuaded of the need for a separate PPS in addition to Jonathan Powell as Chief of Staff, in part because Blair and his team had seemed to get on with him.[55] In contrast, other appointments that had long been dominated by men have been opened up during this period. For example, Butler's appointment of Sonia Phippard as his private secretary in 1989 made her the first woman to serve as the Cabinet Secretary's private secretary.[56]

Antonia Romeo, at the time of her interview Director General (Criminal Justice) at the Ministry of Justice, felt that this was still true in the 2000s. She told us that, regarding career advancement, her experience from the early 2000s onwards showed her that 'the Civil Service is brilliant individually at things that it is not good...institutionally', so those fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time to be talent-spotted will advance further than similarly gifted officials who are under the radar.[57]

Sexism and barriers to advancement

As well as their career development, our interviewees talked about their experiences in the course of doing their job, reflecting on the greater prevalence of sexism in Whitehall during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Many of them had stories to tell, particularly from the earlier part of this period, about instances of sexist behaviour that would seem to constitute clear grounds for dismissal if they occurred today. What is interesting about this is that many of our interviewees felt these incidents did not adversely affect their overall attitude towards their jobs, the Civil Service as an institution or the desirability of Whitehall careers. Only a few told us about sexist incidents that had had a direct impact on their careers; most otherwise described a generally sexist culture.

Valerie Strachan experienced a 'macho' culture in HM Customs and Excise when she joined in 1961. The department's sole senior woman was always described as 'formidable', an adjective not ascribed to her male peers.[58]

Dame Ursula Brennan described her experience of Whitehall a decade later, as a Fast Stream entrant in the mid-1970s. According to Brennan, it was at that time 'still a sexist place. There were people who were bottom-pinchers … There were people, among my generation of young women, there were people you knew to keep away from.'[59]

This continued into the 1980s. HMRC Director Dorothy Brown said that she had experienced sexual harassment by her line manager when an administrative officer in the early 1980s but did not make a formal complaint. Her response at the time was:

I just told my colleagues and everybody said, 'Oh yeah, he does that to everybody', and just dismissed it and laughed it off. But again, I wouldn't do that today. Not only were there organisational issues, some of the people who worked there thought it was OK to treat you differently.[60]

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[53] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[54] Composite of information from the annual *Civil Service Year Book*s.

[55] Anthony Seldon discusses Cabinet Secretary Sir Robin Butler's determination that Tony Blair should have a career civil servant, rather than Powell, in the role of PPS. See Seldon, A., *Blair*, Simon & Schuster, London, 2005, pp. 340-1.

[56] In fact, as Cabinet Secretary, Butler appointed three women as his private secretaries between 1989 and 1998: Sonia Phippard, Melanie Leech and Jan Polley.

[57] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[58] Devanny, J., op. cit.

[59] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

However, for some, these behaviours did impinge on their career prospects. For example, the private secretary role is demanding, entailing long hours and often intense pressure,[61] but it is also an opportunity to work closely with ministers and senior officials at an early stage in your career. This can serve as a career accelerator and enables private secretaries to build up impressive networks of contacts.[62]

But it could be difficult for women to be appointed to these roles in the 1970s and 1980s because, as Jill Rutter told us:

Some ministers were very reluctant to have women private secretaries, particularly as their main private secretary, because their wives thought this is a bit worrying and a bit inappropriate, and all the ministers were, of course, men. But at other times you felt ministers were actually much readier to give women a fair chance – and were much more likely to notice you in a big meeting simply because you had rarity value.[63]

As well as sexist experiences that could affect all women, there was also the issue of marriage and children. While the marriage bar had been removed in most departments, several interviewees recalled episodes in which male officials had seemed concerned that women might go off and have children. Ursula Brennan remembered:

So I am three months into my career as a civil servant and my assistant secretary said to me, 'Oh, are you planning to leave?', so an extraordinary sense that, aged 22, having just started on a civil service career, three months in, I would plan to leave because I was getting married. So there was still a very odd sense. And he was probably 50. He probably was not very old but he seemed antique and he certainly ⋯ there was still a class of them who had lunch in their clubs.[64]

Dorothy Brown, speaking about her time as a new entrant in 1979, said one of her first (male) managers had:

...asked to look at my hands, and I thought he was looking at my nails because back then I used to bite my nails, years ago when I was a young one. And he wasn't. He was looking to see if I had any rings on, and he explained that the reason he was looking for an engagement ring was that if I was engaged, then I would probably want to marry and have children and wouldn't want a career with him. So he needed to understand my intentions.[65]

If women did choose to have children, their job prospects were at risk on their return. Valerie Strachan recalled a moment in the 1970s when she was briefly in the running to become a Treasury private secretary. She was in the room during a phone conversation between her department's Establishment Officer and his Treasury counterpart, during which the Treasury official had seemed to ask whether she was pretty. Ultimately, she was not appointed, although not as a result of her looks. She was told that the minister in question was reportedly 'quite anxious about employing a woman, in particular because at that point, where was I, I had got a small boy, who then would have been about four, and the minister was worried that he would feel guilty if he was keeping me late – so, no, that wasn't a good idea.'[66]

The combination of such attitudes and the culture of long hours and late nights made it harder for working mothers to take advantage of these sought-after roles. A 1991 Cabinet Office progress report on the government's equal opportunities strategy for women stated that women's increased promotion and entry into junior management was in part attributable to greater flexible working and childcare provision. This followed the logic of the (1971) Kemp-Jones report, which had called for more flexible working patterns to improve prospects for retaining and promoting women officials. Our interviewees recalled flexible working practices developing in the late 1970s and, to a greater extent, throughout the 1980s.

Initially, some male managers were sceptical. Strachan noted unease in HM Customs and Excise about the prospect of flexible working:

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[60] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[61] One political scientist refers to the risk of 'burn-out' and the 'culture of long hours' as two significant problems in the configuration of private office work. See Rhodes, R. A. W., 'New Development: From private office to departmental court', *Public Money & Management*, 29:3, 2009, p. 192.

[62] *Ibid*.

[63] Institute for Government interview, April 2015.

[64] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[65] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

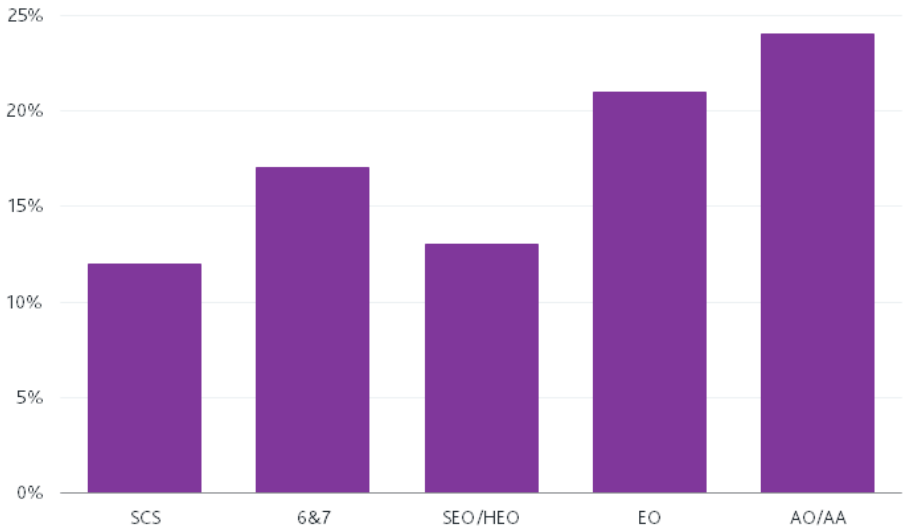
[66] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

There were a lot of people who thought it wouldn't work at all, but one of the regional managers, a fairly apparently conservative sort of bloke, said, 'I think I'd like to give it a go.' So, he started allowing for part-time working and at the next conference of regional managers he stood up and said, 'Well, I've tried it and it's OK. I seem to be getting very good results from it, so I really think we're worrying unnecessarily.' So part-time working then became a possibility for a lot of people. I'm not saying there were a huge number of part-time workers to begin with – it grew gradually – but it was that one manager's readiness to make it work that made the difference.[67]

Between 1984 and 1997 part-time working increased from 15,774 staff to 55,000, although take-up was still greater at lower grades.

Figure 14

Women working part-time by grade, 1 April 1997



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Annual Civil Service Statistics.

But as flexible working developed, it could still cause difficulties, particularly in some of the more senior or more central positions more likely to lead to career advancement. Alice Perkins told us that, following the birth of her children in the early 1980s, she initially chose not to go part time because of the experience of another colleague: 'I had seen that they had put her in a backwater although she was very able and I didn't want that to happen to me.'[68]

Several women officials felt that, into the 1990s, childcare responsibilities still directly led to career setbacks. Dorothy Brown told us:

I still remember a time when temporary promotion to the next grade went to a man, instead of me, because I had a child. My daughter was born in late ... '89/'90 and I might need time off. So I do remember that there was ... it was probably ... it was covered in business rationale, but there was still some suggestion that you may not be as able to give what they needed, because you were a woman and might need to balance.[69]

Other interviewees remembered examples of colleagues trying and failing to balance careers and family responsibilities. Ellen Roberts said:

I have got some very strong examples of women who attempted to balance work and home life and who found it very difficult … One case of a woman who went back into a very demanding job with a young baby and was expected – by a female senior manager – to produce a report over her very first weekend on the job and actually said, 'I simply can't do this' and who I think stepped down almost immediately.

[67] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[68] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[69] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

So there were examples of people who did attempt to balance work and home, and didn't manage it because of the intensity of the pressure.[70]

Dame Helen Ghosh, a former permanent secretary at both Defra and the Home Office, told us that she had advised younger women officials to think carefully about how best to integrate parenthood into their careers: 'I would say, get your name known, show you can do the job, don't arrive and have a baby more or less straight away because you won't necessarily be able to get back in with a choice of great jobs.'[71]

The sharp difference in the career trajectories of married and unmarried women across this period was especially visible in the FCO. Helen McCarthy has characterised the FCO's approach in this period as one of 'evolution' rather than 'revolution', which came 'at the cost of what might have been a much speedier advance in women's status in the Diplomatic Service'.[72] The first female head of mission was appointed in 1973 and the first female ambassador in 1976,[73] but not 'until 1987 was a married woman, Veronica Sutherland, appointed to an ambassadorship, closely followed by Juliet Campbell, but it was perhaps significant that both had married relatively late in life and were childless'.[74] Indeed in '1988, some 15 years after the marriage bar was lifted, there were still only 284 married women across all grades of the service'.[75] To put this into perspective, the Diplomatic Service employed more than 8,000 staff in 1988.[76]

Through the 1990s and into the 2000s, flexible working and the importance of making provision for those with children were taken far more seriously. But there was still sometimes a gulf between the legal or HR provision and how it felt in practice. Antonia Romeo, whose children were born in the mid-2000s, noted:

When I went off on maternity leave, the whole formal 'keeping in touch' thing was hopeless. I do not know who was meant to be formally 'keeping in touch' with me, but nobody did. But it was all right, because I had a bunch of people I knew who were informally keeping me up to date and telling me about opportunities, and when it was time for me to return to work I could get my contacts going and try and sort something out for myself.[77]

Indra Morris, since March 2015 Director General (Criminal Justice) in the Ministry of Justice, but at the time of her interview the Director General (Tax and Welfare) at HM Treasury, noted that throughout her career Whitehall had become much more open to part-time and flexible working, for men as well as women. But she felt that there was still little expectation that flexible working would be an option in senior positions: 'I remember when I was recruiting for a Director role and I rang somebody up and ⋯ she was stunned that I would consider a job share, you know, so there is still a bit of a perception [that flexible working is not possible in the most senior posts].'[78]

Departmental variation

Whitehall comprises some 20 different departments, each with distinctive identities. It is therefore unsurprising that our interviewees experienced contrasting organisational cultures over the course of their careers, with different paces of change.

Whitehall departments each have their own historical inheritance, cultures and of course leaders. These factors all had an effect on how diversity was perceived and pursued within each department. One important metric to track is a department's performance over time in improving the gender balance of its SCS cohort, even in more recent years. As shown in Chapter 2, each of the five departments we analysed performed better in 2014 than in 2005, underlining the trend towards greater gender balance across the whole SCS. But there is also considerable variation across the period and between the departments. For

[70] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[71] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[72] McCarthy, H., *Women of the World*, Bloomsbury, London, p. 285.

[73] The late Dame Anne Warburton. See obituary, 'Dame Anne Warburton, diplomat', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 2015, accessed 10 June 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11662733/Dame-Anne-Warburton-diplomat-obituary.html

[74] McCarthy, H., op. cit., p. 296.

[75] McCarthy, H., op. cit., p. 291.

[76] Government Statistical Service/HM Treasury, *Civil Service Statistics 1988*, HM Stationery Office, London, 1988.

[77] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[78] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

example, the Department of Health (DH) initially performed better than the others, which nonetheless made significant improvements from their lower starting points. Indeed, in 2013 the Treasury overtook DH in SCS gender balance.[79] The steady and undeniable progress made by both the FCO and MoD in improving SCS gender balance cannot yet make up for their historical position as Whitehall backmarkers.

For most departments we were only able to get an impressionistic view, alongside the headline statistics. However, a few interviews brought up the issue of whether some of the delivery or social departments – dealing with health, social security, education or the environment – tended to have a different atmosphere, one that felt more positive for some women.

Ursula Brennan, who joined the Civil Service as a Fast Streamer in 1975, noted that 'you were struck by the fact that departments appeared to differ culturally in the 1970s. The Home Office appeared a more toffee-nosed sort of place, and the Treasury would clearly look down their noses at everybody, and the FCO were obviously a different business altogether.' In contrast, departments such as Health and Social Security felt like a 'new university' and were visibly more female, less Oxbridge and more balanced between traditional policy work and management.[80]

Helen Ghosh, reflecting on her experience in the Department of the Environment in the early 1980s, remembered that its permanent secretary would 'go on holiday with his [male] friends in the department. They'd all go on walking holidays. They'd all go out to the pub at lunchtime. It was a very laddish kind of culture.' Yet they would also 'spot talent even if it was female' and ensure that career-accelerating posts such as private office roles were not the sole preserve of men.[81]

Another department, DHSS, was described by several of our interviewees as quite progressive in the 1970s and 1980s, with a better gender balance than several other Whitehall departments, including at senior levels.

There were mixed views about the Treasury. Valerie Strachan reflected on her experience on secondment in the early 1980s, contrasting it with her home department, HM Customs and Excise: 'In the central departments, females were everywhere, doing all sorts of jobs, highly capably, although thinking back on it, the Treasury at that time did not have many senior women. But the Treasury's attitude to females, as evidenced by working practices, was perfectly OK.' [82]

Other former officials remember the Treasury as being a less inviting place than other departments for both women and men. Alice Perkins described going on secondment to the Treasury in the 1990s as 'like going to another planet'. Compared with her home department, DHSS, the Treasury had an 'inward focus … sharp elbows … emphasis on the individual rather than the team … lack of diversity in all senses'.[83]

Sue Owen, the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), described the issue of the broader culture of HM Treasury after she joined it as an economist in 1989:

> Well, Terry [Burns, Permanent Secretary, 1991-98] said a lot of things about [improving the diversity of the Treasury]. I think he did kind of believe it, but I do not think his colleagues really bought into it … There were lots of warm words, but I do not think very much was really happening. We then went through a kind of period on gender where they did try. They said, 'Oh well, we do not have enough senior women, we'd better bring some in', so there were a few years when some external women were brought in, and they stayed for two or three years and then they left again … They all pretty much hated it and went back to where they came from.[84]

Two departments received stronger criticism from our interviewees and were seen as somewhat behind the curve compared with the rest of Whitehall. As shown, the MoD has achieved an increase in the gender balance of its SCS cohort in recent years, albeit from a low point. Between 2005 and 2014 the percentage of women in its SCS went from 9.8% to 24%. However, the department has been criticised for being an outlier throughout this period, with a 'grade-ist' and male-dominated culture. Ursula Brennan, who from October 2008 until July 2012 was successively the Second Permanent Secretary and (from October 2010) Permanent Secretary at the MoD, told us that:

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[79] In March 2015, two of the Treasury's most senior women, Second Permanent Secretary Sharon White and Director General (Tax and Welfare) Indra Morris, left the department

[80] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[81] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[82] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[83] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[84] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

Some women who work within the defence community have felt the need to be aggressive, pushy and to fight their corner, because if they did not, they would get rolled over by people who just behaved very, very badly. This is not just a problem for women, but also for officials at lower grades.[85]

At the Institute for Government's event on Women and Whitehall, Margaret Aldred, a senior civil servant who is secretary to the Iraq Inquiry, reflected on her 25-year career at the MoD. Aldred joined the department in 1975; she said that, at that time, it was a place where 'institutional sexism bordering on sexual harassment was the norm', and that, even in later years, a woman had left the department because 'she wanted to go and work somewhere where she was treated as "normal"'. Whitehall has improved 'in leaps and bounds' over the years, but Aldred noted the danger that things could also get worse in departments.[86]

The other Whitehall outlier regarding SCS gender balance is the FCO. It makes an interesting and accessible case study, with the Diplomatic Service managed as a separate entity from the rest of the Civil Service. The data it has released about the gender balance of its senior management, as well as relevant academic articles and public commentary, make it possible to delve a little deeper into its more recent efforts to address the historical male dominance of the Diplomatic Service. The historian Zara Steiner wrote of the FCO in 2004:

The figures tell only part of the story. Women still have not been given the top diplomatic jobs (Paula Neville Jones [sic], an acknowledged high-flier, turned down Bonn because she felt that she deserved Paris, symbolically still the plum of the service) … Some, admittedly a minority, claim that the Foreign Office still resembles an all-male boarding school which had taken in a handful of girls in the sixth form, a larger number in the first form, and a handful of token teachers. To be recruited into the Fast Stream, women have to be quite tough.[87]

In March 2014, the FCO Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Simon Fraser, conceded that its pace of change was 'frustratingly slow', but he has also emphasised that the growing number of female heads of mission (39 in 2014, as compared with 22 in 2008 and only 11 in 1999).[88] He argued that the gender balance of the FCO management board (40% female in 2014) reflects the FCO leadership's commitment to further improvements 'through a wide range of initiatives including sponsorship and leadership programmes, flexible and part-time working, outreach programmes to universities, and intern schemes'.[89]

To put these changes in context, the FCO had set a departmental diversity target in 2008 that by 2013 women should comprise 28% of its SCS. This target was 11% lower than the civil service-wide target of 39%, and yet the FCO still failed to meet it. Questioned on this performance in late 2014 by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Fraser conceded that the 2008 target had not been met, but added that a new target had been set, for women to comprise 39% of the FCO's SCS by 2019. Challenged by the Committee that this was very modest, Fraser replied that it was 'a step along a journey and 39% is not the final destination, but it is one that we believe, over a five-year period … if we continue the sort of appointment ratios that we have been making recently, should be a stretching, but attainable objective.'[90]

In the same committee hearing, the FCO's Chief Operating Officer, Deborah Bronnert, explained one of the factors behind the current and historical lack of women ambassadors. Bronnert said that although the marriage bar 'was removed a long time ago now ⋯ it has quite a long shadow':

When we think about a senior ambassador we often think about a man because that is the tradition ⋯ That is a common misconception across the Office and it is holding women back themselves because they do not see themselves in an ambassador role. It is something we have done a lot of work on, both in terms of the appointments we have made but also in highlighting to women in the Foreign Office, but

[85] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[86] Devanny, J., op. cit.

[87] Steiner, Z., 'The Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Resistance and Adaptation to Changing Times', *Contemporary British History*, 18:3, 2004, p. 25.

[88] Rahman, T., 'Women in Diplomacy: An assessment of British female ambassadors in overcoming gender hierarchy, 1990-2010', *American Diplomacy*, 4 April 2011, retrieved 25 June 2015, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2011/0104/comm/rahman_women.html

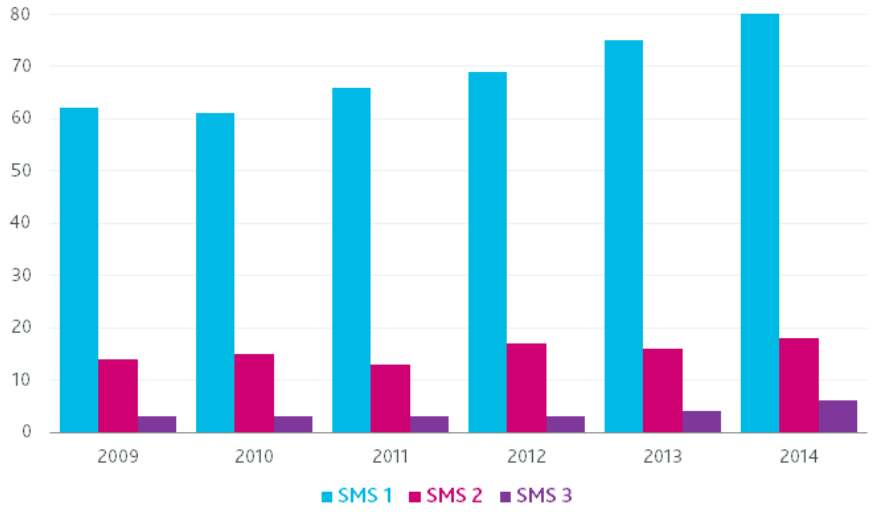
[89] Fraser, S., 'FCO's progress on promoting women', letter to the *Financial Times*, 3 March 2014.

[90] 'Oral evidence: The FCO's performance and finances in 2013-14', HC 605, 25 November 2014, retrieved 1 July, http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-performance-and-finances-in-201314/oral/15795.html

also across Whitehall who might want to come and join us, that they can succeed at senior levels in the Office. We have a very good pipeline now.[91]

Figure 15

Number of women in Senior Civil Service (SMS 1-3), Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2009 to 2014



Source: Institute for Government analysis of House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee report, *FCO Performance and Finances 2013-14*.

The first thing to note about the chart above is that the FCO's SCS cohort – which it calls the Senior Management Service (SMS) – actually has a fourth, highest tier, SMS4. No woman has ever been appointed to this highest grade of the Diplomatic Service, which accounts for the very top posts, currently four in number (permanent under-secretary, ambassadors to Paris and Washington, and permanent representative to the EU).

Second, these are total numbers rather than percentages. According to a June 2015 government statement, as of 31 March 2015 women comprised 27% of the FCO SCS cohort as a whole. The government added that there are currently '36 female heads of post and a further 13 women [who] will take up ambassadorial or head of post positions during this year' and 'two new very senior (SMS3) female ambassadorial appointments have recently taken effect with the arrival of Barbara Woodward in Beijing and Karen Pierce in Kabul.'[92] To put this in context, we estimate that women currently comprise 23% of SMS3 and 18% of SMS2.[93] With no women in SMS4, this means that the majority of the FCO's senior women are in its most junior SCS grade (SMS1), which the chart above demonstrates is the grade in which the most change has been achieved since 2009. This perhaps confirms the phenomenon Deborah Bronnert referred to: an increasing pipeline of female talent but the most senior positions still mostly going to men.

The most prestigious ambassadorships – such as Paris, Washington and the Permanent Representatives to the EU and UN (New York) – still continue to elude women diplomats, as does the FCO Permanent Under-Secretary post. In this, however, the Diplomatic Service is not a complete outlier: there has not yet been a woman Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, or a woman Cabinet Secretary or Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. Comparing the official with the political

[91] Oral evidence, 'The FCO' s performance and finances in 2013-14', HC 605, 25 November 2014, retrieved 1 July, http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-performance-and-finances-in-201314/oral/15795.html

[92] 'Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report HC 605 of Session 2014-15 FCO Performance and Finances 2013-14' (Cm 9058), June 2015, p. 6, retrieved 1 July, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/435544/50038_Cm_9058_Gov_to_HC_Accessible_v0.2.pdf

[93] We arrived at this using the most up-to-date figures available, taking the 2014 numbers provided to the House of Commons select committee and producing percentages based on the total grade-by-grade headcount provided in the report 'Senior Staff and Salary Data as of 30 September 2013', retrieved 1 July 2015, http://data.gov.uk/dataset/staff-organograms-and-pay-foreign-and-commonwealth-office

leadership, there has been only one woman Foreign Secretary (Margaret Beckett between mid-2006 and mid-2007), and no female Chancellor of the Exchequer. There has, of course, been one long-serving female Prime Minister.

Initiatives for change

In the past 40 years there have been various reforms, at both departmental level and civil service-wide; some reforms have specifically aimed to improve gender balance and the wider diversity of the civil service. We felt it was worth narrating the history of these initiatives, and the impact it was felt they had, before going on to look at other factors that seemed to affect gender diversity.

During the 1970s, Whitehall departments tried to address the obvious underachievement and underuse of women in the Civil Service. In 1970, the Civil Service Department commissioned a committee chaired by Elizabeth Kemp-Jones, a senior (and married) official in the DHSS, and at the time one of the most senior women in Whitehall, to investigate ways to boost the employment of women.

The Kemp-Jones Committee's 1971 report, *The Employment of Women in the Civil Service* , stated that: 'From the point of view of equality for women, of opportunity on entry, of promotion when serving, and of pay, the Civil Service was a pioneer and is probably, in these important respects, still at least as good as any employer in this country.'[94] However, it also noted that conditions of service and career pathways were still designed on the assumption of continuous employment, which suited men but made flexible working and career breaks difficult, and therefore had an adverse impact on the retention and career advancement of women.[95]

The report looked specifically at how to expand the provision of part-time working for women in positions of responsibility, how to make civil service jobs more family-friendly, with more flexible working hours and discretionary special leave, and how to improve the retraining offer to women returning to work after a long period of absence (such as maternity leave), including providing more flexible options than residential courses.[96] It also recommended that panels considering promotions should be more gender-balanced.[97]

During this period, however, and into the 1980s, little progress was made in increasing the numbers of women, particularly at the top of the organisation. The whole Open Structure – the three most senior grades in the Civil Service: permanent secretary, deputy secretary, and under-secretary (renamed grades 1-3 in 1984) – was male-dominated throughout the 1980s. Anne Mueller became the most senior woman in the Civil Service when she was appointed Second Permanent Secretary in the Management and Personnel Office in 1984 and subsequently to the same rank in the Treasury from 1987 until her retirement on health grounds in 1990.[98]

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[94] Kemp-Jones, E. M., et al., op. cit., p. 6.

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[96] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-8.

[97] In this, and several other recommendations, it is striking that the Kemp-Jones report foreshadows recommendations made in the September 2014 *Talent Action Plan*, demonstrating to some extent the continuities between current and past efforts to effect change and to embed a more progressive culture in Whitehall.

[98] Llewellyn-Smith, E., 'Mueller, Dame Anne Elisabeth (1930–2000)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, retrieved 11 May 2015, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/74395

The slow pace of change in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates the magnitude of the task that faced Whitehall in addressing its lack of diversity, as well as the gradualist, rather than radical, approach it took. Several initiatives were undertaken during the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and her successor as Prime Minister, John Major, over the course of which the percentage of women increased modestly at every level of the Civil Service.

In 1980 the National Whitley Council on the Civil Service criticised the progress made to date on women's representation and how far they were rewarded.[99] At a headline level, Thatcher's approach to civil service reform was driven by the imperatives of improving Britain's economic competitiveness. She wrote in her memoirs: 'If we were to channel more of the nation's talent into wealth-creating private business, this would inevitably mean reducing employment in the public sector.' This entailed an initial recruitment freeze, efforts to control total civil service pay and to remove jobs from the Civil Service via privatisation, especially posts in the industrial Civil Service.[100] Sir David Omand has spoken about the impact of the 1980s headcount reduction on Fast Stream recruitment, suggesting it was a contributory factor in the shortcomings of the SCS in the late 1990s and early 2000s:

> There were lean years in the 1980s, when the Civil Service should have been taking in 300 Fast Streamers from the graduates and they were taking in a dozen, or fewer, so there were lean years, and those are the people who now, 20 years later, ought to be getting to the top. There was a deficit there.[101]

The Thatcher government introduced a programme of action for women in the Civil Service in 1984, and the Major government revised and updated it in 1992. The 1984 programme aimed to improve gender equality, proposing a series of measures including the appointment of equality officers and convening of equality committees within departments. A *10 Years Progress Report* on the programme of action was published in 1994. This was able to demonstrate modest progress throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, albeit from a very low starting point, in promoting women to more senior positions.

There were also important changes to how departments were managing recruitment and career progression, which would have a bearing on women. One was the creation of more opportunities for entry into the rewarding Fast Stream process for those already in the service.[102] This in theory meant that failure to get in on this career track during initial entry to the Civil Service would not necessarily hinder those with talent. Several departments pursued projects to improve their development of existing talent.

Ellen Roberts, reflecting on her experience as a DHSS Fast Streamer in the 1980s, noted that there had been:

> ...few attempts at the time to draw on the talents across this huge department and so we set about inventing a Fast Stream in-service version. It was quite novel at the time, actually, and it met some resistance but it was a sign that by the late, mid/late '80s there was more attention to valuing staff and developing their potential. Second, the department also introduced a management development programme, which was for people who were not on the Fast Stream but nevertheless had potential at EO/SEO level, so that was a kind of version of it which was again about valuing and developing potential.[103]

By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, diversity generally was starting to become a more salient issue for employers including the Civil Service, and new initiatives were launched. Systematic, civil service-wide data collection on ethnicity and disability dates from this period, having been preceded by some regional data in the 1980s. Programmes of Action for ethnic minority and disabled officials, the first of their kind, followed in 1990 and 1994 respectively.[104]

However, for Ursula Brennan, the focus on diversity during the 1980s was more about representativeness and perception than about seeing positive benefits for the Civil Service:

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[99] Briar, C., *Working For Women?: Gendered work and welfare policies in twentieth-century Britain*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 107.

[100] Thatcher, M., *The Downing Street Years*, HarperCollins, London, 1993, p. 45.

[101] Omand, D., House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, 'Examination of Witnesses (Questions 260-279)', 9 March 2006, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmpubadm/122/6030904.htm

[102] Burnham, J., and Pyper, R., *Britain's Modernised Civil Service*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 200.

[103] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[104] In 1998 the New Labour government folded these three separate programmes into one overarching programme of action for equal opportunities.

There was not a strong enough sense of appreciating the 'business case' for diversity. It was more a case of, 'Oh dear, these figures do not look very good – we'd better do something about it. How irritating and it will cost us money', rather than actually, 'Are we losing talent?' It took us a while to recognise the strength of the business case for thinking about diversity, not just because it was fashionable or people were talking about it, but because actually you were losing skills, abilities, talent and creativity that we should have been able to exploit.[105]

During the early 1990s, diversity in general began to be recognised more and more as something that affected capability. Through this period and into the 2000s, how Whitehall attempted to widen the pool of talent and open itself up is a fascinating story in itself. In Whitehall specifically, the Civil Service challenged conceptions of how it perceived itself and what kind of mandarin skill sets were needed. In 1993, the Efficiency Unit's *Career Management and Succession Planning Study* (better known as the Oughton Report, after its author) recommended a series of measures to improve the skills of senior civil servants and open up SCS recruitment to external competition. It also recommended that a senior adviser should be appointed to advise the Head of the Civil Service on equal opportunities, and that there should be greater use of scholarships to attract minority-ethnic candidates.

In our interviews we heard some criticism that the government during this time focused on the pursuit of targets, with little appreciation of the deeper work needed to establish pipelines. Ursula Brennan told us that there was:

...that endless business about having targets with no conception of what was necessary in order to achieve them. If you write down a target for women in a grade, you then need to say to yourself, 'How do people get into that grade, and into feeder grades? What is the proportion in those grades?' There is no point in having a target, e.g. that says nine out of 10 people who are promoted should be from a particular group, without having an understanding of how credible your targets are and of how you are going to deliver. We did spend a long time just pointlessly writing numbers down, not really doing enough to plan for effective delivery of these outcomes.[106]

How far diversity was actually about getting in wider expertise, skills and different perspectives was an issue in other reforms. It was a long-running story in which gender, ethnicity and disability were only slowly connected. Back in the late 1960s, the Fulton Report had famously criticised the concept of the generalist, classically educated mandarin and called for the use of more specialists. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the Next Steps reforms, which created executive agencies, were designed to allow more opportunities for, and place greater emphasis on, managerial or operational skills.

A separate issue was whether, by providing Next Steps agencies with more autonomy, the Civil Service was also promoting more decentralisation and diversity in the way HR, recruitment and talent management were handled. This was an extension of a long-running debate about how unified or diverse different departments and parts of the Civil Service were or should be in their approach to managing staff. As the then Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, Robin Butler, explained at the time:

A feature of the government's executive operations is the diversity of their role, location and the skills required for them. It is not sensible or economic to have a uniform structure of pay and conditions which seeks to cover a forester in the Highlands, a coastguard in Devon and a printer in Norwich. In the past the government had too monolithic and centralized a structure for such matters and public money was, arguably, not put to its best use. Since no central organisation can know how resources can best be used in each situation there is much to be said for delegating such responsibilities to those who run the services.[107]

Our interviewees, reflecting broader perception and their own experience, had positive views about the impact of agencies and non-departmental public bodies on the diversity of the Civil Service. Anne Lambert, a former senior Whitehall official with experience of departments, agencies and regulators, noted that Whitehall departments appeared to be less diverse than the class of separate, non-departmental public bodies she had encountered, which looked to her 'much more diverse than I would have imagined a Whitehall department. Again, it is both diverse in terms of different nationalities, different minorities, not as good as it should be, but it is much more diverse than I would remember a Whitehall department.'[108] She suggested that the specialised nature of many bodies meant that the criteria for appointing skilled staff were different from the mainstream civil

[105] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[106] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[107] Butler, R., 'Reinventing British Government', *Public Administration*, vol. 72, summer 1994, p. 266.

[108] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

service entry criteria, and that this might have made it easier for regulators in particular to appoint a more diverse staff than Whitehall departments.

There is, however, a contrasting view of the impact of the Next Steps agencies on diversity and equality of opportunity within the Civil Service, with one recent study suggesting that the Next Steps reforms had 'unintended and negative consequences for equality and diversity'. This was reportedly due to the potentially complicated relationship between 'organisational autonomy and representation', with more autonomous executive agencies possessing greater freedom to construct recruitment and promotion policies that diverged from the nationwide civil service norm. It again shows the long-standing and recurring tension between centralised and devolved control of recruitment and promotion, an issue deserving of its own study.[109]

In addition to headcount reductions and the further rolling out of the Next Steps agencies, the Major government pursued several reforms of civil service management, recruitment and personnel policies, setting out its case in *The Civil Service: Continuity and Change* (1994) and *The Civil Service: Taking Forward Continuity and Change* (1995). Key reforms included the ceding in April 1996 of further responsibilities for recruitment and setting of pay and grading to individual departments and agencies. At the same time, the Major government created the SCS (amalgamating grades 1-5) as a unified entity and increased emphasis on opening up Whitehall, especially at senior levels, to external talent. This was particularly the case in the recruitment of chief executives for the Next Steps agencies.[110]

During the Labour government from 1997, initiatives abounded, as did increased use of statistics. After the 1997 general election, New Labour pursued a more proactive, 'gender mainstreaming' approach to legislation and public policy more widely. This entailed deliberate consideration of the impact of draft legislation and initiatives on both men and women. A minister for women was appointed with a new Women's Unit to coordinate this cross-government initiative.[111] The Labour Party in opposition had first proposed a ministry for women in 1986, but this commitment gradually mutated, so that by 1996 there was no pledge to create a new ministry, but instead a minister for women was appointed with Cabinet rank, and the cross-cutting Women's Unit established to focus on gender mainstreaming.[112]

However, the academic Judith Squires notes there was public scepticism about the efficacy or value for money of the Women's Unit and its successor, the Women and Equality Unit.[113] While 'the Blair government placed considerable emphasis upon the use of units to shape the formation and delivery of public policy' ,[114] the Women's Unit was alleged to be in 'Whitehall's suburbia',[115] at the periphery of policy during Tony Blair's first term.

From 1997, under both the Blair and Gordon Brown governments, targets and quotas continued to be used to promote equalities in the public sector as a whole, including in the Civil Service, and from '2000 onwards, a range of equality duties were introduced by the UK Labour government to make public organisations more accountable for the level of representation within their workforce'.[116]

As well as diversity of gender, ethnicity and disability, in the early 2000s the Civil Service, as part of thinking about its capability and reform agenda more widely, focused on how to bring in more outsiders and recruit people later in their career. *Bringing in and Bringing on Talent*, led by David Omand, then Home Office Permanent Secretary, was not *per se* a gender

[109] Andrews, R., and Ashworth, R., 'Determinants of Representation: an empirical assessment of the UK Civil Service', *Policy and Politics*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2013, pp. 431, 441.

[110] See House of Lords, 'Public Service – Report', 19 January 1998, para 93, retrieved 24 June 2015, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199798/ldselect/ldpubsrv/055/psrep10.htm

[111] Squires, J., 'The Challenge of Diversity: The evolution of women's policy agencies in Britain', *Politics & Gender*, 3:4, 2007, p. 516.

[112] Squires, J., and Wickham-Jones, M., 'Mainstreaming in Westminster and Whitehall: From Labour's Ministry for Women to the Women and Equality Unit', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55, 2002, pp. 57-61.

[113] Squires, J., 'The Challenge of Diversity', op. cit., p. 519.

[114] Squires, J., and Wickham-Jones, M., op. cit., p. 63.

[115] *Ibid*., p. 66.

[116] Andrews, R., and Ashworth, R., op. cit., p. 430.

initiative. But it highlighted the way new entrants were brought in and acclimatised, raising a number of interesting points about how Whitehall was adapting to increased pressure for more diverse talent, particularly at the top.[117]

The procedures put in place to prepare these new entrants for life in Whitehall were perceived as worse than the induction offered to graduate entrants. Antonia Romeo joined the Civil Service from the private sector in the early 2000s. She told us that, at this time, the Civil Service's methods of integrating new entrants coming from outside the public sector were in need of improvement:

[They] did not have a clue about how to take somebody in from the outside who did not understand the Civil Service – all the cultural dynamics about the way the Civil Service works. A lot of it is not written down, and so you arrived in a department and there were just ways of doing things that you had to learn by osmosis. Because most of the civil servants in the department had never worked anywhere else – they did not know what was different that you did not yet know.[118]

The extent to which Whitehall was able to integrate recruits from outside of government (especially into senior roles), who might have differed in style and manner from career officials, raises interesting questions about how easily it has dealt with other forms of diversity. As Whitehall began to open up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a difference of opinion at senior levels about the desirability of more external recruitment. For example, Sir Michael Quinlan, Permanent Secretary at both the Department of Employment (1983-88) and Ministry of Defence (1988-92), told a parliamentary committee in 2006 that Whitehall was 'enriched and refreshed by having people come in to appropriate posts from the outside', so long as the Civil Service avoided too high a percentage of the most senior posts going to outsiders. Sir Nicholas Montagu, Chairman of the Inland Revenue from 1997 until 2004, sounded a more sceptical note; he had 'misgivings' about the '"outside is good" philosophy insidiously getting embedded', especially for senior appointments, with the effect of discouraging people from pursuing a career in the Civil Service. There seemed to be a sense that Whitehall benefited from growing its own, and that there was strong institutional knowledge and a valuable culture that could be cultivated by a career service.

Senior officials accepted that benefits and additional expertise could be had from a wider pool of talent, but were concerned about what could be lost. This was a repeated theme in the drive to increase diversity: not a directly gender-related problem, but rather a reluctance to bring in people who seemed different from the norm – and that could include women, particularly in senior positions.

Omand told the same parliamentary hearing that the introduction of outsiders to Whitehall had been beneficial and had not discouraged 'bright people' from joining earlier in their careers. He did, however, recognise that more needed to be done to provide induction for those who entered the Civil Service later in their careers, especially in terms of the public service ethos:

If we are bringing in, as we have been, fairly large numbers of people into significant positions of responsibility who have not grown up with the ethos of public service, I think there is recognition now that more effort should be made, and more attention [be] given, to how you induct them and how you make it very clear that there are values to which they have to subscribe if they are going to be members of the public service.[119]

Between 1997-98 and 2001-02, the number of recruitments from outside of the Civil Service into the SCS doubled,[120] and the way that Whitehall recruits and retains outsiders in the SCS remains a salient issue to this day.[121] However, Sue Owen, reflecting on the impact of the *Bringing in and Bringing on Talent* initiative in the early 2000s, and on subsequent efforts to develop and promote a more diverse range of SCS officials, told us:

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[117] See *Bringing in and Bringing on Talent: Improving the diversity of the Senior Civil Service*, *1999-2002*, Institute for Government, 2014, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/more-effective-whitehall/civil-service-reform-past-lessons/bringing-and-bringing-talent

[118] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[119] House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, 'Examination of Witnesses (Questions 260-279)', 9 March 2006, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmpubadm/122/6030904.htm

[120] *Bringing in and Bringing on Talent*, op. cit.

[121] See Baxendale, C., 'How to Best Attract, Induct and Retain Talent recruited into the Senior Civil Service', September 2014, retrieved 6 July 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/418051/FINAL_EXTERNAL_HIRES_REPORT_150328.pdf

People had mixed feelings about [*Bringing in and Bringing on Talent*] because there was a feeling that you needed to grow your own as well as just bringing people in from outside who did not always get it and then left. So, I think that initiative was a score draw. With all of these things it is about keeping it up. You have these little pushes and then there is a bit of a 'tick box' and people think it is all right, but as we are seeing with the Treasury now, [which is] losing three senior women, while there is a better pipeline than there used to be, there are, once again, no women in the top team. [The permanent secretary] is going to have to try and do something.[122]

From the late 1990s into the 2000s, the figures on diversity were changing. The gender balance of the SCS, created in 1996, has progressively improved, as shown in Chapter 2. In Fast Stream recruitment there was also greater gender balance in appointments from 1998 onwards. Fast Stream new entrants were gender-balanced for the first time in 2000.[123]

However, the headline service-wide figures concealed a more mixed record at the departmental level. In 2000, the academic Karen Ross noted the uneven departmental performance underlying statistics for women in the SCS across the whole Civil Service:

Whilst six departments have at least 25% of SCS grades occupied by women – Health (38%); Culture, Media and Sport (36%); FCO (30%); Social Security (29%); Welsh Office (27%); and the Home Office (25%) – four departments still have fewer than 10% of women in SCS grades: Intelligence Services (3%); MoD (6%); Northern Ireland Office (6%); and the CPS (9%).[124]

Change was also slow at the highest level of Whitehall. Despite progress in the SCS more generally, only in the summer of 2000 did the number of women employed as permanent secretaries treble, following the appointment of Mavis (later Dame Mavis) McDonald at the Cabinet Office and Juliet (later Dame Juliet) Wheldon at the Treasury Solicitor's Office.[125] Rachel Lomax had hitherto been the most senior woman in Whitehall, following the retirement of Ann Bowtell from the Department of Social Security in 1999 and Valerie Strachan from Customs and Excise in 2000. Other senior women had also recently retired, such as Barbara Mills as Director of Public Prosecutions in 1998. This lack of gender balance at the highest levels was noticed particularly by some officials who had joined the Civil Service from other sectors. For example, Helen Edwards joined the Home Office as a director in 2002, with a background in local government and the voluntary sector, and is today the Second Permanent Secretary in the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). She remembers:

...being asked in 2002 to give a presentation to the Wednesday morning meeting of permanent secretaries. I was the only woman in the room, and apart from one person everyone was white...I'd come from a sector where there are lots of women leaders, and lots of black and minority ethnic leaders as well, so it was quite striking.[126]

Experiences like this put into perspective the challenge facing senior officials in the early 2000s in creating a pipeline of female talent in the SCS and facilitating the eventual improvement of gender balance among permanent secretaries.

From 2005, in the context of wider efforts to promote more active consideration of gender in government policy, the Blair government aimed to increase diversity – not only in terms of gender – in the Civil Service. There was a big push, led by the Head of the Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus (now Lord) O'Donnell, and by senior women in the service. Targets were important at departmental level, as was instilling diversity into corporate priorities, but there were also a range of initiatives such as a senior women's network, mentoring programmes, and appointing senior leaders as diversity champions.

The (November 2005) *10 Point Plan* to improve Civil Service diversity, backed by legislation and recruitment quotas, focused on:

- targets
- measurements and evaluation
- a cross-government network of board-level, departmental diversity champions
- leadership and accountability
- recruitment

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[122] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[123] Ross, K., *Women at the Top 2000: Cracking the public sector glass ceiling*, Hansard Society, London, 2000, p. 9.

[124] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[125] Ross, K., *Women at the Top 2000*, op. cit., p. 8.

[126] Ross, M., 'Interview: Helen Edwards', *Civil Service World*, 23 September 2014, retrieved 7 May 2015, http://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/interview/interview-helen-edwards

- development
- behaviour and culture change
- diversity impact of the efficiency and relocation reviews
- mainstreaming
- communication.

Under the Brown government, this approach continued with the 2008 equality and diversity strategy *Promoting Equality, Valuing Diversity*. This aimed to continue previous efforts to:

- change behaviour to create a civil service-wide, inclusive culture, confident in its own diversity
- develop strong leadership – down to first-line management level – and clear, transparent accountability for delivering diversity
- improve talent management systems to enable everyone to realise their potential, and accelerate the rate at which the Civil Service recruited, retained and promoted from different backgrounds.[127]

Promoting Equality, Valuing Diversity set targets for delivering a more diverse SCS, comprising 39% representation of women, 5% of ethnic minorities and 5% of disabled people.[128] In parallel with the diversity strategy and at the behest of the Diversity Champions Network, in February 2008 the Cabinet Office published a *Good Practice Guide* to promote diversity in the SCS. This aimed to assist departments in devising 'diversity-proofed' recruitment campaigns and fostering effective development and training opportunities to create an 'internal "pipeline" for under-represented groups'.[129] In all of these initiatives during the period there was also, again, a tension between centralisation and greater departmental autonomy in addressing the issue. The centre of Whitehall, most commonly the Cabinet Office, often led on efforts to foster best practice and improve diversity and talent management efforts in line departments and agencies. But there was a view among our interviewees – both those with experience of the centre and those who had worked in line departments – that they should not simply wait for the centre to lead, but needed to own and drive efforts to progress themselves. Antonia Romeo was representative in reflecting that often, outside of the centre, 'we just got on and did our own thing.'[130]

Others made the same point in talking about earlier periods. Valerie Strachan, who worked in and around Whitehall from 1961 until 2000, observed:

> My view is that change happens because a few people somewhere think that it would be a useful thing to do, and they do it, and if the centre is clever it latches on to the people who have done it and parades them, 'See, they did it in this department'…So I think change is a mixture of some people trying it and the centre being alert to where the change is happening, which fits in with what they're trying to achieve, and then pushing it.[131]

Ministers, leaders and role models

While targets and centralised initiatives played an important role, many of our interviewees emphasised the importance of senior leadership in driving departmental change, as well as the impact that ministers could have on the culture of a department. Our interviewees talked about the value of role models at senior levels who could inspire younger women to set their sights on the most senior posts in Whitehall. It is difficult, from the comments of our interviewees, to draw strong conclusions about the relative success or otherwise of specific leaders, but it is worth bringing out what kinds of factors officials talked about when discussing the influence such people had.

Looking at the earlier part of our period, a potential role model might have been the UK's first female prime minister. Baroness Thatcher's memoirs are silent on the issue of gender equality in the Civil Service. The bureaucratic qualities she

[127] Cabinet Office, *Promoting Equality, Valuing Diversity,* 2008, p. 8.

[128] Cabinet Office, *Promoting Equality, Valuing Diversity*, 2008, p. 24.

[129] Cabinet Office, *Good Practice Guide: Diversity in Recruitment to the SCS*, 2008, pp. 2-3, accessed 23 March, http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/20091207GoodPracticeGuideDiversityinRecruitmenttotheSCS_tcm6-35296.pdf

[130] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[131] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

explicitly valued were 'lively minds and a commitment to good administration'.[132] This omission was consistent with her wider views: one of her Cabinet ministers, Douglas (now Lord) Hurd, said that Thatcher 'wasn't a feminist. All that line of argument left her cold'.[133] This is reflected in her Cabinet appointments. Baroness Young was the only woman to serve in Thatcher's Cabinet, as Leader of the House of Lords from 1981 to 1983, before she was demoted to become a Minister of State at the FCO until her retirement in 1987. On Young's demotion, rumours 'abounded that Thatcher could not tolerate another forceful woman in her Cabinet, especially one who was not afraid to disagree with her there, as Young had on education and reform of the House of Lords.'[134] The number of women appointed to senior positions in Whitehall was similarly low during the Thatcher period, but our interviewees recalled that Thatcher would often be 'extremely nice' on a personal level to individual women officials.[135]

Interviewees emphasised that the approach of ministers could have an impact on the working environment for officials in ministerial private offices, as well as in the wider department. Alice Perkins said that ministers could foster 'family-friendly' working patterns, singling out the 'laid-back' Ken Clarke, who did not chase officials for work late into the evening, and contrasting him with Norman Fowler, who kept his officials late, sometimes for meetings that were ultimately cancelled.

The former Cabinet Secretary Lord O'Donnell recalled the impact of greater numbers of women ministers on the working culture of the Treasury in the late 1990s. He said that Ruth Kelly's refusal when, successively, Economic Secretary and Financial Secretary to the Treasury between 2001 and 2004, to take home a box of papers forced the department to realise that it was able to adjust to different, more family-friendly working patterns.[136] In contrast, Jill Rutter, Treasury press secretary in the late 1990s, told us that the Treasury had become 'bloke central' under Gordon Brown, possibly creating an environment in which it was harder for women to get the top jobs. Certainly there was no female civil servant in a policy Director General or Permanent Secretary role at the Treasury during Brown's tenure.[137]

Senior leaders from the official side were also mentioned as having been very influential. This was often in providing support, advice, acting as a role model or in setting a tone that more junior officials found beneficial. Many of our interviewees could name a male or female boss who had been particularly supportive to them individually or who had made a personal effort to improve conditions and culture more widely in a department.

Our interviews also brought up the role of permanent secretaries. For instance, Sue Owen told us that during the 2000s the Department for International Development (DfID) was one of the most progressive in Whitehall in its approach to fostering a more diverse workforce and senior leadership team. This was, she said, largely driven by its then Permanent Secretary, Sir Suma Chakrabarti:

Suma was, I have to say, was always very, very hot on diversity, not just gender but ethnic minority too, and he had a top team of four – two men, two women, two whites, two non-whites....he actually really made an effort and made it very clear that he was making an effort, and this was not just being warm and cuddly, it made good business sense and actually these people had all gone through proper processes and all of that.[138]

Owen talked about the importance not only of specific measures, but also of creating the right conditions and offering encouragement:

[DfID] then...in promoting people into the SCS, started to use techniques like having somebody on the promotion panel that was more junior than the post being appointed to, a staff member basically. They were usually very good at spotting good leaders and managers, and in that

[132] Thatcher, M., op. cit., p. 46.

[133] Holehouse, M., 'Margaret Thatcher: a pioneering woman with no time for feminists', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 April 2013, retrieved 11 May, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/margaret-thatcher/9979922/Margaret-Thatcher-a-pioneering-woman-with-no-time-for-feminists.html

[134] Jackson, C., 'Young, Janet Mary, Baroness Young (1926–2002)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2011, retrieved 11 May 2015, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/77303

[135] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[136] Devanny, J., op. cit.

[137] Institute for Government interview, April 2015. In contrast, Mary Keegan became the Treasury's managing director, financial management, reporting and audit, in July 2004.

[138] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

period [the department] doubled the proportion of women in the SCS over about two years, simply by encouraging women to apply, encouraging ethnic minority people to apply, and having a staff member on the panel.[139]

Several of our interviewees talked about concerted and successive efforts, from the mid-1990s, on the part of the Treasury's senior leadership and successive permanent secretaries to make changes and become more open and diverse, particularly in how they attempted to address the culture that some described as aggressive. Views were mixed about how bad it had been (those interviewees who had come from outside generally viewed it more critically than Treasury 'lifers') and also about how successful particular permanent secretaries had been in addressing it. However, there was a clear sense that, since his appointment as Permanent Secretary in 2005, Sir Nicholas Macpherson has used his personal authority to drive change.

Alice Perkins, who joined the Treasury as Director of Public Spending in 1993 from the Department of Health, noted that in the 1990s:

[The culture] was benign, which was great, but that wasn't enough; you really, really had to rock the boat, to shake things up, to make it happen, and I think the second thing, which I linked with that, was that people at the top of the Treasury recruited in their own image. Nick Macpherson, to his eternal credit, has really changed that and he is the first person to have succeeded.[140]

Indra Morris joined the Civil Service as a Fast Streamer in 1995, leaving for the private sector in 2001 before returning as a Director General at the Treasury in 2010. Looking back over the past 20 years, she said: 'I think the Treasury has changed a lot. It is a more diverse place; it is more open; it is more collaborative.'[141]

A few interviewees told us that senior leadership style and approach could also make a difference in the culture of the Permanent Secretaries Group. Several interviewees talked about Gus O'Donnell's approach as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service. Shortly before his retirement, O'Donnell wrote:

Women are now permanent secretaries, when they used to be permanently secretaries. We recently reached the point where half the permanent secretaries in Whitehall were women, while the service as a whole is becoming far more reflective of the society it serves.[142]

While women never comprised half the total cohort of permanent secretaries – including 'floating' and ambassadorial permanent secretaries – they did for a time during 2011 comprise half of permanent secretaries heading departments, depending on what you counted as a department.[143] Certainly, during O'Donnell's six and a half years as Head of the Civil Service, more women were appointed to permanent secretary posts than in the previous 25 years combined. However, in 2012, the departures of Moira Wallace, Dame Gill Morgan and Dame Helen Ghosh all led to male replacements. Concerns were raised that the gains made by women at the top were not as permanent as had been hoped.[144]

[139] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[140] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[141] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[142] O'Donnell, G., 'It's risks, not rules, that must point the way', *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 2011, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8971893/Its-risks-not-rules-that-must-point-the-way.html

[143] Rutter, J., 'Undoing GOD's work? Will gains women made at the top of Whitehall prove short-lived? – update', Institute for Government, 14 August 2012, retrieved 6 July 2015, http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/4780/undoing-god%E2%80%99s-work-will-gains-women-made-at-the-top-of-whitehall-prove-short-lived-update/

[144] Rutter, J., 'Undoing GOD's work? Will gains women made at the top of Whitehall prove short-lived?', Institute for Government, 26 July 2012, retrieved 8 July 2015, http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/4688/undoing-god%E2%80%99s-work-upcoming-appointments-will-determine-whether-gains-women-made-at-the-top-of-whitehall-prove-short-lived/

Wider social change – Whitehall as leader or follower?

As the Civil Service changed, so did wider society. This chapter briefly puts Whitehall's changes into broader historical context, looking at the changing gender balance in Britain since 1979. This was a period of gradual social change, with several pioneering appointments of women to senior positions in other sectors of employment.

The 1990s saw continuing voluntary and private sector activity on the issue of improving employment opportunities for women and women's representation in senior roles. For example, the Hansard Society produced its *Women at the Top* report in 1990 (with five-yearly progress reviews thereafter) and the campaign group Business in the Community launched its Opportunity 2000 (subsequently restyled Opportunity Now) initiative in 1991.

These efforts were directed against what Baroness Howe of Idlicote, the chair of the Hansard Society's Commission on Women at the Top, described as the 'formidable barriers ‑ in the form of structures, working practices and, above all, attitudes ‑ preventing women reaching senior positions in the public and private sectors'.[145] There were pioneering appointments in the 1990s as women finally either ascended to the highest ranks of, or simply gained admission into, certain professions, vocations or institutions. Susan McRae produced one such list in 1996:

> There have been some very public improvements in the position of women. A woman Speaker now presides over the House of Commons. Women may be ordained in the Church of England. A woman chief constable sits at the top of a major police force. Four former men's colleges in Oxford are headed by women; as is one former women's college in that same university, despite having had an opportunity to select a man for its top job.[146]

McRae's list reflects gender imbalances within many sectors, in which women were disproportionately under-represented at the senior levels. For example, when Pauline Clare became the first woman chief constable in the country on her appointment in Lancashire in June 1995, women comprised 12% of police officers nationwide but under 2% of senior police officers.[147]

Similarly, Betty (later Baroness) Boothroyd's appointment as the first woman Speaker of the House of Commons in April 1992[148] reflected a gradual improvement in the parliamentary representation of women throughout the 20th century. Between 1918 and 2010, 368 women were elected as Members of Parliament, equating to just 7% of all MPs over the period. Boothroyd's election preceded a significant spike in the numbers of women MPs in 1997. But Parliament was slower in

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[145] Howe, E., preface to Childs, S., Lovenduski, J., and Campbell, R., *Women at the Top 2005: Changing Numbers, Changing Politics*, Hansard Society, London, 2005, p. 4.

[146] McRae, S., *Women at the Top: Progress after five years*, March 1996, Hansard Society, London, p. 5, accessed 20 March 2015, http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Women-at-the-Top-Progress-after-five-years-1996.pdf

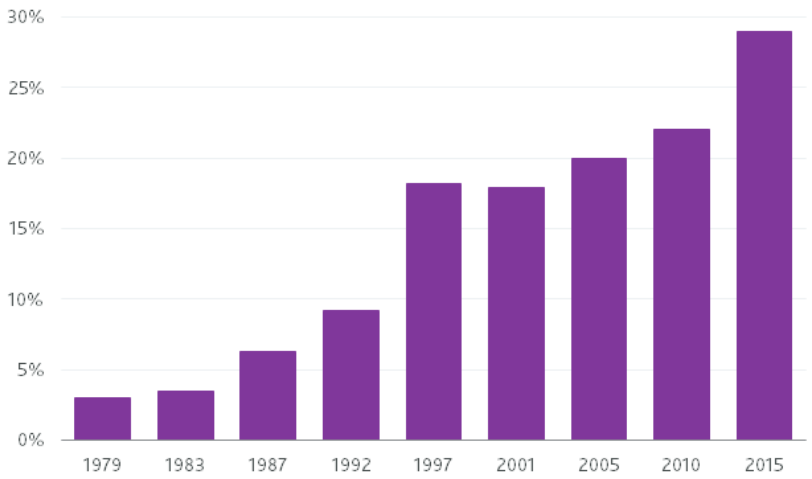
[147] 'First woman chief constable is appointed', *The Independent,* 15 June 1995, accessed 20 March 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/first-woman-chief-constable-is-appointed-1586466.html

[148] 'On this Day, 27 April 1992 – Betty Boothroyd is new Speaker', BBC News, accessed 20 March 2015, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/27/newsid_2502000/2502597.stm

improving its representation of ethnic minority women: Diane Abbott, the first black woman MP, was elected only in 1987. Before the 2010 general election there had only ever been two black women MPs and there were no Asian women MPs.[149]

Figure 16

Percentage of women among MPs elected at general elections, 1979 to 2015



Source: Institute for Government analysis of UK Political Info, 'Women MPs & parliamentary candidates since 1945'.

The Labour Party's use of all-women shortlists led to the sharp rise in women's representation at the 1997 general election, with 101 women Labour MPs elected, albeit many of these in marginal seats that were lost in subsequent elections. The shortlists were controversial at the time, prompting legal challenge by male would-be Labour candidates. This led to an industrial tribunal ruling in 1996 that all-women shortlists contravened the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Since then, the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act (2002) and Equality Act (2010) have provided a legal basis for all-women shortlists to be used until 2030.[150]

Turning from the House of Commons to the House of Lords, there are currently 199 women peers, comprising 24% of the total 826 members of the Lords, only slightly less than the 29% female membership of the House of Commons. Women have been eligible to sit in the Lords only since 1958, since when '1,454 peerages have been created, including 266 women'. This means that women have comprised just 18% of all peers created since 1958.[151] The biggest step forward came following the removal of all but 92 of the mostly male hereditary peers in 1999, when the 'proportion of women in the House of Lords almost doubled overnight, from 8.8% to 15.8%. Since then, the ratio of female peers to male peers has continued to increase, albeit more slowly.' Indeed, since 2000, '63 crossbench life peers have been appointed based on the nominations of the House of Lords Appointments Commission; 23 of these, or 36%, are women.' The Appointments Commission was created on the recommendation of Lord Wakeham's Royal Commission on the House of Lords. Interestingly, the Wakeham Commission had also recommended there be a statutory duty to ensure that a minimum of 30% of new peers were women, to make progress towards a more gender-balanced House of Lords, but this recommendation was not and has never yet been adopted.[152]

[149] Wood, J., and Cracknell, R., 'Ethnic Minorities in Politics, Government and Public Life', House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/SG/1156, 24 January 2014, p. 5, retrieved 29 March 2015, http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN01156/ethnic-minorities-in-politics-and-government

[150] Kelly, R., and White, I., 'All-women Shortlists', House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 18 December 2012, p. 3, accessed 20 March 2015, http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN05057/allwomen-shortlists

[151] Hughes, D., 'Women in the House of Lords', House of Lords Library Note (LLN-2015-0017), 30 June 2015, p. 3, retrieved 30 June 2015, http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/LLN-2015-0017#fullreport

[152] *Ibid*., p. 7.

Another example of what might be called the slow pace of social change was that most Oxbridge colleges started admitting women on the same basis as men only from 1988 onwards, after the extreme outlier – Magdalene College, Cambridge (Oriel being the last Oxford college in 1985) – admitted its first women students, a move reportedly met by some male students wearing black armbands in protest.[153]

Finally, although the General Synod of the Anglican Church had resolved in 1975 that there were no 'fundamental objections' to women becoming priests, legislation was not agreed by the Synod until November 1992; it gained Royal Assent in 1993, leading to the first ordinations of women priests in March 1994.[154] (By contrast, the General Synod did not back women bishops until July 2014, so the Church of England had to wait until December 2014 for the announcement that Libby Lane, who had been among the first women ordained in 1994, was to become Bishop of Stockport.)[155]

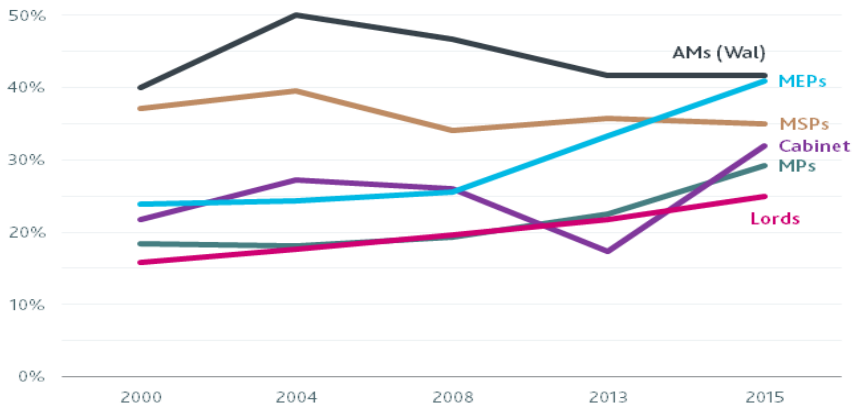
All this reflected the gradual pace of broader social and cultural change that was also seen in the Civil Service. Whitehall's most senior positions were dominated by men in the 1980s and 1990s, but so was much of British society. Dorothy Brown, a Director at HMRC, reflected on the broader social and cultural trends underlying changes in the Civil Service over the course of her career. She noted, for example, 'the big change...we saw in the '90s. People stopped making assumptions about what you would be willing to do, or able to do, because of your gender or your working pattern.'[156]

The Civil Service was part of a gradual social change, in which traditionally male-dominated professions became slightly less male dominated at the highest level. It should also be remembered that the relatively modest achievements in the 1980s and 1990s took place against the backdrop of a significant headcount reduction in the Civil Service, making it a potentially challenging environment for pursuing a parallel agenda for changing the composition of the workforce.[157]

To put this performance into context, it is possible to compare the progress made by the Civil Service in improving the percentages of women at higher grades with that made in other parts of political life over recent years. When compared with Britain's democratic institutions (as in Figure 17 below) – for example, the Houses of Parliament and the devolved administrations – the SCS (at 37.9% women) holds its own, whereas the cohort of UK-based permanent secretaries (both department-heading and 'floating' officials with permanent secretary rank, so excluding the few permanent secretary-grade ambassadors) fares less well, at less than 20% – closer to the political backmarkers, namely peers and MPs.

Figure 17

Percentage of women among UK political groups, 2000 to 2015



Source: IfG analysis of Centre for Women and Democracy data (2013) and House of Commons Library Briefing Paper SN01250 (19 June 2015).

[153] Sweeney-Baird, C., 'Magdalene celebrates admission of women 25 years on', *Varsity Online,* 9 November 2013, accessed 20 March 2015, http://www.varsity.co.uk/news/6433

[154] 'The women priests debate', The Church of England, 2015, accessed 20 March 2015, https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/women-bishops/the-women-priests-debate.aspx

[155] 'Reverend Libby Lane named as CofE's first female bishop', BBC News, 17 December 2014, retrieved 24 June 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-30510137

[156] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[157] Corby, S., op. cit.

Turning from politics to the private sector, similar progress can be seen in the appointment of women to the boards of British companies, albeit rising from a lower starting point and reaching a lower status quo than the current SCS. According to the professional boards' forum BoardWatch, which tracks the appointment of women to the boards of FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 companies, women comprised only 6.2% of FTSE 100 directors in 1999, rising to 23.6% as of March 2015, although interestingly the fastest growth during this period was in 2010-15, as women still comprised only 12.6% of boards in 2010.

This suggests the SCS made much more rapid progress than private sector comparators between 1997 and 2010, whereas progress has been more modest since then, at a time when progress in business has increased (although women remain more likely to be appointed as non-executive than as executive directors).[158] The public sector has also performed better in reducing the gender pay gap over the same period. From 1997 onwards, the Office for National Statistics recorded a gradual decline in the gap, with inequality in the private sector persistently worse than in the public sector, but with both sectors progressively narrowing the gap.[159]

[158] See 'History 1999-2015. FTSE 100: % women directors', BoardWatch, 2015, accessed 13 June, http://www.boardsforum.co.uk/boardwatch.html

[159] 'Statistical Bulletin: Annual survey of hours and earnings, 2014 provisional results', Office for National Statistics, 19 November 2014, accessed 13 June 2015, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ashe/annual-survey-of-hours-and-earnings/2014-provisional-results/stb-ashe-statistical-bulletin-2014.html#tab-Gender-pay-differences

Whitehall culture

Our interviews raised the fascinating question of whether there was a stereotypical civil service 'mandarin' class, more likely to succeed than others and possibly promoting in its own image. This chapter explores the question of Whitehall's changing 'culture' and how it is shaped by officials with different backgrounds and from different generations.

The 'mandarin' class was certainly part of the critique of the 1968 Fulton Report, and was famously lampooned in the TV series *Yes, Minister*, but in some form it is still part of the critique of today's Whitehall. The question also arises of whether such a culture, as experienced by our interviewees, had a negative effect on women's advancement.

In our interviews, this cultural dimension seemed to have two facets. One was the idea that it may have been as much about personality type, but was described in gender terms – being 'macho', masculine or in some way aggressive or confrontational. For others it was class- or educationally based, being about Oxbridge, a background in classics or PPE, about networks and outside interests – cricket, later football, opera and private members' clubs.

The academic Sophie Watson posed a series of questions about civil service culture in the period up to the mid-1990s, including:

To what extent has the exclusionary culture of the upper echelons of the Civil Service persisted in the context of broader social shifts and an explicit commitment to the introduction of equal opportunity policy in the early 1980s?

[And:] Does equal opportunity policy simply mean succeeding on terms prescribed by the men in place?[160]

Watson argued that it was necessary for successful women in the Civil Service to become 'the right sort of chap … a profoundly class-bounded, as well as gendered notion, in which people from racial or ethnic minorities have been incorporated at the top to an even lesser extent than women'.[161]

How far this is a fair characterisation of Whitehall is difficult to determine. Studies have looked at gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background as indicators, but the cultural dimension, described by those who felt alienated by it, was sometimes more intangible and harder to trace over time. Its effect on women covered a number of different things: perception of the dominant character or behaviours of people, a sense of exclusion, feeling pressure to conform to behaviour to be able to succeed, or simply not being entirely comfortable with the atmosphere or a general feeling of not fitting in. Our interviews provided examples of how this felt in practice: in meetings, going into a new department or in terms of career progression.

However, interviewees also talked about why such a culture had *not* affected them, how it varied across departments, or how this dimension was present, and sometimes worse, in other sectors as well. Overall it appeared to people to be more prevalent, in hindsight, during the earlier decades up to the 1990s, but was recognised, particularly at the higher levels in Whitehall, in later decades and as still in existence today.

Turning first to the socio-economic angle, the popular image of the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s was of classicist, Oxbridge-educated and cricket-loving mandarins dominating the top of Whitehall. Robin Butler told us that as a new-entrant

[160] Watson, S., 'Producing the right sort of chap: the Senior Civil Service as an exclusionary culture', *Policy & Politics*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1994, p. 212.

[161] *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Assistant Principal (or Fast Streamer) at the Treasury in September 1961, his Oxbridge classicist background was not unusual and he went on to form a cross-Whitehall cricket team – called the Mandarins – with other Fast Streamers who had studied on the second course at the Centre for Administrative Studies[162] in 1964. Butler also recalled being part of a group of Treasury Principals who were interviewed for television on the day that the Fulton Report was released in 1968. The broadcast was edited to underline Fulton's criticism of Whitehall's Oxbridge elitism, with Butler and his peers answering questions about their educational backgrounds by naming their public schools and Oxbridge degree courses ('Classics, History').

One can't really know how many senior officials enjoyed cricket – apart from perhaps counting club memberships in *Who's Who* and elsewhere. However, in terms of the advantages of an Oxbridge undergraduate education, one, admittedly imperfect, way of measuring is to look at the educational backgrounds of permanent secretaries. We counted the number of Oxbridge-educated, department-heading permanent secretaries in mid-1979 and the equivalent number in May 2010. It is striking that of each cohort, roughly two-thirds were Oxbridge-educated: 11 out of 17 permanent secretaries had Oxbridge undergraduate degrees in 1979, as compared with 12 out of 19 in 2010.[163] Two of the 1979 cohort did not go to university at all, compared with one in the 2010 group (Dame Lesley Strathie). It is less easy to establish the total numbers who studied classics or Greats, let alone how many used Latin phrases in the workplace.

How well you got on with this environment depended on background more than gender. Some of the female officials we spoke to pondered whether it had helped that they fitted in in other ways. In short, it was about being the right sort of 'female chap'. This was because, separately from gender, socio-economic background, education and class were strong cultural influences. Anne Lambert told us that she felt her academic background had certainly assisted her integration into the Civil Service in the late 1970s and 1980s:

I was privileged in lots of ways because, it is not just gender, you know – I came from Oxford and, you know, middle-class Oxbridge is … fairly routine, so the fact that I am a woman is one thing, but there are other things, where I just fit the mould.[164]

Likewise, Sonia Phippard, a Fast Streamer at the centre in the 1980s, told us:

Now you could be a 'female chap' quite easily but if you didn't want to compromise in that way there was a challenge – and whoever you were, it helped if you'd been to Oxford or Cambridge. So the real pressure remained a fairly distinct culture – if you could adapt, you 'fitted in', but that actually it could be difficult and very uncomfortable for people from a variety of backgrounds to adapt to that culture.[165]

On the other hand, Gus O'Donnell said that, though he was a well-educated economist, even he felt the exclusionary impact of a 1980s Treasury culture in which cricketing references and Latin phrases proliferated.[166]

How this translated into behaviour in some departments was one of the most complicated factors to explore; generalised responses were mixed with specific examples. Butler described the atmosphere of departments he encountered early in his career in the 1960s and 1970s: the Home Office, which he felt was hierarchical and restrictive, and the Foreign Office, which was 'snooty'.[167] He also talked about the Treasury in the 1960s and 1970s, describing it as having a strongly meritocratic working culture at that time:

What I particularly liked about it was that there were short lines of command...I went to my first meeting chaired by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in my first year...I was all the time encouraged to think that however junior you were, you made a contribution and you got into policy quite early. [168]

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[162] HM Treasury established the Centre for Administrative Studies in 1963, to provide training (including in economics) for its Assistant Principals once they had completed their probationary period. The range of this training was expanded under the auspices of the Civil Service College from 1970 onwards. See Fry, G. K., *Policy and Management in the British Civil Service*, op. cit., p. 92.

[163] Various sources, including the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, *Who's Who*, obituaries in *The Times* and – for the 2010 cohort – official biographies on Gov.uk and entries on Wikipedia.

[164] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[165] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[166] O'Donnell was speaking at the Institute for Government's *Women and Whitehall* event on 2 June 2015. See Devanny, J., 'Women and Whitehall: How did Whitehall change after 1979?', op. cit.

[167] Institute for Government interview, April 2015.

[168] Institute for Government interview, April 2015.

This encouragement of its young high-flyers could explain why some have perceived Treasury officials throughout this period as being more confident than their peers in other Whitehall departments. But others talked about a culture of arrogance, which was not accepting of outsiders. Perceptions depended on whether you thrived in that atmosphere or felt excluded from it.

Perceptions of the dominant, 'male' behaviours within departments were likely shaped to some extent by personal experience and the perceived impact of these behaviours on an individual's working life. Many of those who had successful careers during this period, by definition, either thrived in this culture or else prospered despite it. However, a theme did emerge concerning how women felt they had to behave to succeed. Our *Women and Whitehall* event led to a discussion of adjectives applied to women who succeeded, but not applied to successful men. The former DCMS Permanent Secretary Dame Sue Street said she hoped that women officials would not feel they needed to be 'battleaxes' to succeed in Whitehall.[169] It was very noticeable that, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when fewer women were at the top, they were predominantly seen in these terms, with more than one of our interviewees referring to the senior women of this period as 'formidable' or in similar terms.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, growing awareness of the effect of culture on gender diversity, and recognition that certain personality traits and characteristics were prized for advancement or appointment to high-flying jobs, had led to the conclusion that women needed extra assistance to develop these traits. One example was that 'there was a big phase of assertiveness training for women', which according to Ursula Brennan, appeared to be based on a belief that quieter women were assumed to be 'mousey' and needed assistance to conform to the 'ideal type' of the 'showy and noisy' official you supposedly needed to be 'to do the private office, and that was a gender thing'.[170]

Brennan described the Civil Service of the 1980s and early 1990s as intangibly but perceptibly harder on women than men. She remembered:

…a lot of women who fell out with the system and left. Maybe it was that there were so few women that, when they went, it was noticeable but I do not remember so many men falling out in quite that way. There were people who were competent and those that were less competent, but it seemed as if there was a period when a number of women seemed to find it difficult to make things fit, and it felt kind of scratchy and it was as if the gains that were being made started to look as if they were eroding.

Looking back on this episode and this period, Brennan noted that it was not a question of work/life balance, but that difficulties in work led to more women giving in rather than wanting to fight: 'All of us hit rocky patches in our careers when things do not go well, but it seemed as if for women this seemed to be terminal.'[171]

Sonia Phippard, now a Director General at Defra, noted that, while diversity issues were higher up the agenda in the 1990s, the focus was often on structural and HR barriers to success, not the less tangible barriers:

What I think was tricky was that while people generally understood [the need for greater diversity] intellectually and could tackle it, there was much less awareness of cultural issues – for instance, the culture of the permanent secretary network, which…was quite a chaps' network.[172]

A number of our interviewees talked about how networks developed or perpetuated a culture – particularly relationships that came from being at university together, socialising together or shared interests – but importantly in Whitehall terms, also the effect of working together over the course of a career. Interviewees talked about relationships they built early in their career, as a result of their initial training, or in particular jobs, such as working in a private office or at the centre – in Number 10 or the Cabinet Office.

Writing with a particular focus on how scientific advice gets into policymaking, the entrepreneur and government adviser David Cleevely has described the integral role played by 'supernodes', those individuals who:

⋯ are highly connected with many others. If you can enlist their support then you can communicate more quickly and effectively with the rest of the network. In practice this is very important; the supernodes become well known (because they are very well connected) and

[169] Street was speaking at the Institute for Government's *Women and Whitehall* event on 2 June 2015. See Devanny, J., op. cit.

[170] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[171] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[172] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

everybody wants to connect with them. So in networks of people … there is a bias to connecting to already well-connected nodes, which makes them extraordinarily effective. If you want to influence what is going on, find the supernodes.[173]

We found traces of this in our interviews. While fostering good relations for those within them, for those on the outside networks could be excluding and a barrier.

Kate Jenkins argued that networks were crucial to a career civil service. She told us that a wide range of contacts, built up over a career inside Whitehall, had helped her to navigate through disagreements and negotiate solutions – she often knew who to go to when a problem needed fixing. Though recognising the exclusivity these networks created, Jenkins felt that the decline of the 'career official', which came with more permeable recruitment and career structures during the late 1990s and early 2000s, had meant something was lost. She also told us that the increasing openness of Whitehall to outsiders – especially from the late 1990s onwards – had probably changed the nature of these networks. People who had come into Whitehall later in their careers:

...set up their own networks, which were different...effectively, we all grew up together and the strength of that kind of network is quite different from the kind of working network strengths that you put up if you come in, do a few years and go out again. And once you've got a lot of people moving in and out, the networks were going to be different, and I think that's meant that the way in which the Civil Service carries out what it does has now probably changed quite radically, simply because that old cosy world had to go and has gone – it had its strengths but I think it's gone.[174]

Sonia Phippard talked about a generational asymmetry in which culture changed over time, particularly through the late 1990s and into the 2000s, but also how, even as senior leaders were earnestly trying to improve the diversity of the Civil Service, the cultural factor could still persist:

There was lots of good thinking and some quite sophisticated understanding about removing bias at the point of selection, but it hadn't really filtered through to the culture. People at more senior levels just didn't realise quite how far there was a need to change, to adapt. With many people pursuing a 40-year career, and you've got people at both ends, it's a big age gap. And even now, but certainly then, a lot of people [in the] Civil Service were there for life.[175]

However, for others, while generational change may have had an effect, the active influence of women officials was just as important. For Ursula Brennan, the generation of senior women officials from the 1980s through to the present day were so important because:

There was a bit of a sense that there was a generation that had to prove that they were the best, in order to be able to carve out the space that then other people often were able to colonise. So I think some of it is not just age; it did require some individuals to say, 'I want to do something different' … You need some people to push.[176]

A few of our interviewees felt a culture was particularly noticeable within the Permanent Secretaries Group, who would meet every Wednesday morning. Ann Bowtell, First Civil Service Commissioner from 1993-95 and then Permanent Secretary at the Department of Social Security between 1995 and 1999, told us that even as a successful and senior woman she felt out of place in the 1990s at permanent secretaries' meetings, which were 'quite intimidating and it isn't only that you're a woman – you may also not have the public school background which most of the men had'.[177]

Interviewees talked about the influence of some at the top of the organisation in changing the culture there, in particular of Gus O'Donnell's tenure as Cabinet Secretary from 2005. One former Permanent Secretary felt that there had been a genuine effort under O'Donnell's leadership to foster a cohesive and open culture among the Permanent Secretaries Group:

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[173] Cleevely, D., 'Networks, nodes and nonlinearity: how scientific advice gets into policy', in Doubleday, R., and Wilsdon, J. (eds), *Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Whitehall*, Centre for Science and Policy, Cambridge, 2013, p. 89, retrieved 30 June 2015, http://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/1/fdsaw.pdf

[174] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[175] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[176] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[177] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

When I was there, Gus tried to make those meetings [of permanent secretaries] what I would understand a [to be] senior leadership meeting for the system. He encouraged people to be very open...Gus tried really hard. He tried to bring endeavour, he tried to make those proper leadership meetings, he tried to get honesty and he tried to encourage sharing and all of those sorts of things.[178]

However, it was their view that, following O'Donnell's retirement, these practices had not been preserved and that this had an impact on how the Permanent Secretaries Group interacted subsequently. What factors may have had an effect and to what extent was beyond the remit of our history. But Jill Rutter has also noted the reversal in numbers of female permanent secretaries after 2011, pointing to the lack of a 'talent pipeline' to embed the advances in diversity.[179]

As discussed, in our interviews we asked about and therefore prompted interviewees to think about their experiences from a gender point of view. Many said that it had been one aspect of their working career, but not necessarily true of every part of it or of every part of the Civil Service. But the very persistence of these references to a more male culture as a negative influence, even through to the present day, is noteworthy. The impression given is that, despite many advances, at the top of Whitehall and in certain departments or fields, this cultural factor is still an issue. It puts the history in context and is a reminder of the complexity of the changes that have occurred over the past 30 or 40 years.

Quotations from the 2014 Hay Group/Cabinet Office review *Women in Whitehall* bear great resemblance to some of the descriptions our interviewees gave of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Some even suggested there had been a regression in SCS culture in recent years:

Things have changed again, particularly over the last five years...I have seen the culture become more and more macho. The rise of certain individuals, male, white and hugely opinionated, who do not like anyone questioning them, challenging them, has put us back to the Dark Ages. Women are back to being told they are mouthy, aggressive or not leaders when they disagree or display softer inclusive leadership skills.[180]

Helen McCarthy, in her history of female diplomats up to the present day, also perceived a continuation of 'male behaviours':

Despite the changes which have taken place since the 1990s, including the enshrinement of 'diversity' as an organisational objective, at its higher levels the Diplomatic Service is still a male-dominated institution in which male behaviours, attitudes and assumptions inevitably prevail, and this affects all women, regardless of whether or not they have children. It is notoriously difficult to pin down what constitutes this 'male culture' with any precision. Some current Diplomatic Service members talk of 'blokeishness' or 'machismo', of a certain quality of intellectual aggression or tough talking which many women are either unable or unwilling to emulate.[181]

At times, the exclusivity of Whitehall's culture had an impact on diversity generally, and it has affected some women more than others.

The former DHSS official Ellen Roberts reflected on her first impressions of the Civil Service in the early 1980s as a reasonably gender-balanced employer, but added: 'In terms of diversity more generally…it was a pretty middle-class environment. It was very white – I don't remember anyone who wasn't white, actually, certainly on the admin trainee scheme, so it was quite narrow in its demographic, really.'[182]

Framing the issue more broadly as one of 'removing the barriers to success' for all under-represented groups, including black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), registered-disabled, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) officials, Simon Fraser, then civil service diversity champion, noted in March 2015 that 'Too many of our people are sceptical that the Civil Service is consistently committed to diversity and inclusion, and too often our colleagues from under-represented groups don't feel like they can thrive and express their identity in the Civil Service.'[183]

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[178] Institute for Government interview, January 2015.

[179] Rutter, J., 'Undoing GOD's work? – update', op. cit.

[180] *Women in Whitehall: Culture, leadership, talent*, Hay Group/Cabinet Office, May 2014, p. 21, retrieved 9 May 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/351195/Rpt-GMA-Cabinet_Office-Talented_Women-Final_Report___9.5.14_.pdf

[181] McCarthy, H., op. cit., p. 296.

[182] Institute for Government interview, March 2015.

[183] Fraser, S., 'Talent Action Plan: Progress Update and Refreshed Priorities', Gov.uk, 26 March 2015, retrieved 30 March 2015, https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/2015/03/26/talent-action-plan-progress-update-and-refreshed-priorities/

Bringing the story up to the present day, the Hay Group report of 2104, like our interviewees, observed that the Civil Service performed well in promoting women into senior positions, relative to other public and private sector comparators.[184] However, it concluded that its 'culture and leadership climate are preventing talented women from progressing into more senior roles … many people, and women in particular, do not believe the rhetoric on policy, promotions, or what is valued in the SCS. Accordingly, many choose to opt out.'[185]

Many of these barriers have existed in some form for decades. As we have seen, there is a strong historical connection between barriers to diversity and the pervading culture of Whitehall. This was not, of course, a barrier to all, nor is it true of the whole Civil Service, but it was still a recognisable feature across the period.

As several of our interviewees explained, Whitehall's culture is not simply a reflection of the gender balance of its senior cadres: socio-economic background, educational and ethnic diversity are also relevant, to say nothing of the impact of assertive temperaments and 'sharp-elbowed' behaviours at the top. There are a plethora of factors determining Whitehall's culture, and history suggests the pace at which it has changed and continues to do so – whether within a given department or across Whitehall – can ebb and flow.

[184] *Women in Whitehall: Culture, leadership, talent*, op. cit., p. 9.

[185] *Ibid*., p. 4.

Conclusion

When I started, I thought, 'Look at all these Fast Streamers – we are all probably 50/50, or not far off, men and women. In 20 years' time, that is what we will look like in more senior positions, and in 40 years' time the whole thing will be equal up to the highest levels of management.' And it turned out not to be like that, and time alone does not do it. You do need something more active than that.[186]

Ursula Brennan's reflection above, on her first impressions as a new Fast Streamer in 1975 and how they measured up to subsequent developments, is a fitting note to begin this conclusion. This report has demonstrated the changes in Whitehall's gender balance since the late 1970s, but also identified the uneven state and gradual pace of those changes.

There are obvious perils when reflecting on changing experiences over the course of a long career. Valerie Strachan observed that: 'It's difficult to differentiate the changes that I experienced because I was doing different things, progressing, and [because of] the changes that were happening externally to me.' [187] Moving between departments, in and out of Whitehall, and up through the grades, all affect perspective. Moreover, society changes with the passage of time, so the broader context is different for memories that are ultimately only snapshots, tempered by hindsight, of different points in time.

According to one academic study, today's Civil Service has a 'mixed reputation', with some seeing it as a family-friendly 'model employer' and others criticising it as still 'a white, male-dominated, Oxbridge middle-class workforce'.[188] Throughout the period since 1979, the Civil Service has been seen by many as 'a very good career for a woman', especially compared with other career options. Anne Lambert, who joined in 1977, told us that, at the time, 'it was pretty clear that the City was still very male-dominated, and the manufacturing industry more so … The Civil Service was seen as equal, well, better than most.'[189] But as the data show, this perception was not matched by significant representation of women at the highest levels of Whitehall in the 1980s.

The official figures show that the 1980s and early 1990s were a period of slow change at the top of the Civil Service, with the most senior posts dominated by men. Efforts to create a pipeline of women beneath these grades had more success, and the period from the late 1990s onwards saw consistent growth in the proportion of women in the SCS and feeder grades. Chapter 2 looked at the trajectories of seven departments since 2005, showing that increasing gender balance in the SCS Whitehall-wide masked much more variation across departments. More than anything else, this underlines the value of the historical approach, drawing on the memories of current and former officials to reconstruct the past experience of women working in different Whitehall departments. The statistics tell only part of the story.

At the highest levels of the Civil Service, the total number of women employed as permanent secretaries is still relatively small, currently less than 20% of the Permanent Secretaries Group, so the appearance of constant improvement is vulnerable to sharp reversal, as occurred in 2012 when a number of the most senior women officials left the Civil Service.[190]

The former Permanent Secretary Ann Bowtell reflected:

It's true in a lot of places that women don't seem to do that last step, whether it's because they've come up more slowly, they've got children or whether actually they are just not prepared to go through what you've got to go through to be right at the top … they are not prepared to give their lives up.[191]

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[186] Ursula Brennan, Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[187] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[188] Andrews, R., and Ashworth, R., 'Is the UK Civil Service becoming more representative of the population it serves and, if so, why?', *Democratic Audit*, 24 June 2014, accessed 16 September 2014, http://www.democraticaudit.com/?p=6156

[189] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[190] Neville, S., Warrell, H., and Pickard, J., 'Whitehall women's exodus grows', *Financial Times*, 13 August 2012, accessed 23 March 2015, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/67e613b6-e07e-11e1-9335-00144feab49a.html#axzz3VDxvDm00

[191] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

The data on improving SCS gender balance from 1996 onwards suggests that Whitehall is much better placed in terms of the pipeline of talented women coming through the most senior grades than it was when Bowtell was DSS Permanent Secretary. But the challenge she identified was that of converting this pipeline into a consistently larger cohort of female permanent secretaries, a challenge which Whitehall faces to this day.

That critical mass has been growing. As *Civil Service World* observed at the time, even in spite of the 2012 reversal:

> Compared to other parts of society, the Civil Service is a bastion of gender equality. In 2012, when almost a third of civil service TMPs [top management posts] were held by women, just 17% of Cabinet members, 16% of FTSE 100 directors and 5% of national newspaper editors were women – according to the 2012 Sex and Power index, produced by pressure group alliance Counting Women in Coalition.[192]

Our interviewees experienced – and indeed helped foster – sizeable demographic change to Whitehall over this period, but not as rapidly as some felt it should occur; progress was even slower in certain departments and at the top of the organisation. Many of our interviewees felt that the culture of Whitehall had changed, again slowly, but suggested that educational and social background was still a factor today. For some, the pace of change was a long way off what they had expected when they joined, as was the case with Ursula Brennan's recollection that opened this chapter.

At the Institute for Government's June 2015 *Women and Whitehall* event, the panellists were asked to offer hypothetical advice to Melanie Dawes, the current civil service gender champion and Permanent Secretary at DCLG. In response, Gus O'Donnell stressed the importance of passionate leadership from the very top of Whitehall in embedding and building on progress in bringing on talent. Valerie Strachan emphasised the need for the most senior women officials in Whitehall to be as highly visible as possible, to show other women that they can aspire to the top jobs. Answering the same question, Alice Perkins sounded a cautionary note, that successful initiatives such as departmental women's networks, once established, risk being forgotten: *'It can't be assumed that because progress has been made and important things have been landed that they will then stay – people move on, things change.'*193 These responses underline two of the recurring themes implicit in our interviewees' recollections: first, that the personal effort made by particular senior officials was a big factor in initiatives for reform; and second, the fallacy that change is historically inevitable.

The largest part of the Civil Service, of course, works outside of Whitehall in offices across the country. Ursula Brennan told us that here, the Civil Service had historically – and still has today – a conspicuous amount of 'untapped' or unfulfilled female talent:

> Really talented women who are kind of trapped because they are the second earner in the household and the partner's job ties them to the location because that is where the children are at school. So the women rise through the ranks in their local office or their court, and the men, at that point, would move to somewhere else and they would have travelling time which might be tiresome, but it was worth it for the promotion, or they might even physically move. The women were not going to do that and so you had a lot of untapped talent. That is absolutely true of women, really talented women who were never going to go anywhere and never get promoted because the primary thing for them was the ability to be able to operate at a particular location.[194]

And whereas gender diversity had been improving steadily at every level, there is a widespread feeling that in 2015 the Civil Service, despite its progress over the past 30 years, still needs to do much more to address its ethnic and wider diversity. Shirley Pointer, the Department of Health director of HR, who joined the Civil Service from the private sector in 2004, said:

> A key challenge for the Civil Service and in particular in relation to the SCS grades is ethnic diversity. This is still a big issue for the majority of departments. The publication of the *Talent Action Plan* and the Removing Barriers to Success programme demonstrate a refreshed commitment to addressing this issue. We have made progress, and the Fast Stream intake is a really good example of this. The gender diversity of the Fast Stream is virtually 50/50 and the proportion of BAME entrants is growing year on year, but BAME applicants remain less likely to progress through to appointment than their white counterparts, and Oxbridge candidates are more likely to be successful than those from other universities, and make up over 20% of the intake. So overall, while we have a good story to tell I don't think the overall diversity of our graduate intake compared to some other organisations is as good as it could be.[195]

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[192] Brecknell, S., 'Spot the Difference', *Civil Service World,* 15 March 2013, accessed 23 March 2015, http://www.civilserviceworld.com/spot-the-difference

[193] Devanny, J., op. cit.

[194] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

[195] Institute for Government interview, February 2015.

Conclusion

The memories and views of three generations of civil servants are collected in this report. Their dominant narrative was upbeat, of a more gender-balanced Whitehall, with women today represented in far greater numbers, at much more senior levels, than was the case in 1979. But there was also a cautionary note beneath this positive message: today's Whitehall needs to be both mindful of its past and determined in its pursuit of future change if it is to preserve and expand on the progress made by previous generations.

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